



Oral Religions

Native Religions of People's
Whose Culture Is Not Primarily
Written



What is this?



**Oral Religions May
Have Ancient Roots**

- *"Venus" of Willendorf – Artifact of Ancient Oral Religion*
- Discovered in Austria, thought to come from fertility rituals dating from 30,000 -25,000 BCE

<http://www.dean.sbc.edu/images/willendorf.jpg>

Difficulties in Studying Oral Religions

- Bias in academics to study text-based cultures
 - It's easier not to study oral religions!
- Assumption that non-literate cultures are "inferior" and have nothing to offer
- Sheer number and diversity of oral religions
- Artifacts of oral religions may be impermanent (dance, songs, masks, etc.) and difficult to interpret

Interpreting Artifacts

What makes a sculpture or cave painting religious rather than artistic?

Close Relationship to Nature

- Animism is often found in oral religions
 - Animism is belief that there is a life force in all things
- Animism tends to lead to deep respect or reverence for natural world
 - Animals may be seen as relatives
 - Living things may be viewed as sources of blessing or harm
- Recent environmental movements like EarthFirst! are drawing upon oral religions for their own ceremonies

Importance of Sacred Places and Times

- Mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, etc., may be viewed as being sacred spaces
- Sacred spaces may be “constructed,” e.g., Stonehenge, sweat lodge, special gates, etc.
- Sacred times often coincide with rhythms of nature

Central Role of Stories

- Stories of sacred origins
 - Animals and humans descended from gods or divine actions
- Stories of gods or other divine beings
 - Often mention of a high god, but devotion tends to be to that god's offspring
- Stories of primal ancestors
 - Often seen as having become gods in some way
 - Recent ancestors are often revered or feared in oral religions

Importance of Ceremonies

- Ceremonies often are the means of re-telling sacred stories
 - May include means of enhancing religious experience, such as fasting, ingesting mind-altering substances, etc.
- Ceremonies will typically mark rites of passage related to the life-cycle
 - Birth
 - Puberty
 - Marriage
 - Death
- Taboos and Sacrifices help protect people from dangerous spirits or forces
 - Animal sacrifices are usually associated with sacred meals

Shamanism

- A shaman is a "religious specialist who travels between human and spirit worlds. In many tribal societies, the shaman has powers of spirit control, divination, healing, and communicating with the gods. These powers are usually exercised through elaborate rituals and trance-like states. Shamans are recognized as specially gifted with an ability to communicate with the sacred."
 - Presides over ceremonies
 - Helps with healing ("medicine man")
 - Provides guidance and wisdom to leaders, e.g., through divination

Sioux Religion as an Example of Native American Oral Religion

- Wakantanka – the supreme spirit (Great Spirit) or mystery within all living creatures
 - One of the stories of Wakantanka is that after he had created all animals, he was still lonely, and through Mother Earth created humans in his image
- Story of White Buffalo Calf Woman (see <http://www.kstrom.net/isk/arvol/buffpipe.html>)

Sioux Sacred Rites

- Sweat Lodge – structure symbolizes the universe and the six directions (north, south, east, west, earth, heavens)
 - For healing, preparation for other rites
- The picture below depicts a Sweat Lodge frame (found at <http://www.montana.edu/www/fpc/tribes/Sweat.htm>)



Sioux Sacred Rites (cont.)

Vision Quest

- The vision quest was a time of prayer and fasting, usually initiated by a sweat ceremony
- The quest may last from 1-4 days, and the observants would seek a vision that usually placed them in the form of an animal that became a sacred guide to him/her from then on
- When the quest was an initiation into adulthood, the initiates would be given a special song by the spirits that they would use for the rest of their lives

Sioux Sacred Rites (cont.)

Sun Dance Ceremony

- Done in preparation for summer hunt
- Sun pole would be selected by wise woman (40-50 ft. high tree) and maidens would trim off branches the first day
- The first day young warriors would attack the tree. If it survived, it would be cut down and placed at another location.
- The next day buffalo leather thongs are attached to pole and an enclosure is erected around the pole
- The 3rd or 4th day the sun dance begins, young men who had fasted several days, come in war costume and dance from sunrise to sunset
- The following day, the medicine man runs a sharp knife through skin of the chest, a length of animal bone is inserted and tied to a thong, and the men run back from the pole, with the thongs stretching the skin until it is torn through – usually after hours (in some cases, the men are pulled up the pole by the thongs until the skin breaks
- As sun sets, the wounded warriors kneel and bow to the sun

What do the Sioux ceremonies say about who they are and what is sacred?

How Does Native American
Religion View Abortion?
