Change and Syncretism

Indigenous religions no longer exist as they did before contact with the ‘outside’ world. This situation is partly the result of syncretism, the merging of elements from different cultures. Many Native North American religions have been deeply affected by Christianity; some African rituals have incorporated elements of Islam; the sacred oral stories of Japanese Shinto became written texts under the influence of Chinese Buddhism. Does this mean that ‘real’ Indigenous religions have disappeared?

Definitely not. Change and syncretism have taken place among all religions throughout history. It is true that Indigenous religions today are not the same as they were a hundred, or five hundred, or ten thousand years ago. But the traditions as they exist now are no less authentic than they were in the past. The forms of Christianity practiced in the contemporary United States have likewise been variously influenced by the beliefs and practices of many cultures, including African and Native American. These American forms in turn are quite different from the European Christianity that Martin Luther knew in the sixteenth-century, or the Hellenized Christianity that Paul taught in the first century—a tradition which of course began life as the Palestinian Judaism practiced by Jesus. Like everything else in the world, religions change, and none of them are exactly what they used to be.

These days, Indigenous religious practices can be found anywhere: Anishinaubae drumming ceremonies in Toronto, Canada; Yoruba funeral rites in London, England; and Maori purification rituals at the opera house in Sydney, Australia. Indigenous people and their religions may be connected to history, but they are not bound (or buried) by it.
‘Primitives’ and the Problem of History

For many years non-Indigenous people assumed that Indigenous people and cultures had changed very little over time—at least until the two groups met and colonization began. Until relatively recently, in fact, only anthropologists studied Aboriginal people: historians (including historians of religion) did not, because they assumed there was no Aboriginal history to look at.

The development of anthropology as an academic field can be traced to the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among other factors that led to this development, the Enlightenment was an age of exploration, during which reports were regularly sent back to Europe describing encounters with previously unknown cultures—cultures that were primarily oral in nature, for example, and that used simpler technology. Assuming that such cultures had remained essentially unchanged from their beginnings, the Europeans referred to them as ‘primitive’ (from the Latin primus, meaning ‘first’). For those people, history was assumed to have begun only when they first encountered ‘modern/civilized’ cultures.

This assumption was supported by the fact that the majority of Europeans at the time of contact were Christians who believed both in the (God-given) superiority of their own culture, and in the divine imperative to spread their religion to those who had not yet heard the gospel. Indigenous cultures were seen as ideal recipients of the Word of God, blank slates with no real history—or religion—of their own. This missionary worldview often went hand in hand with academic inquiry, and tended to colour the scholars’ interpretation (in some cases, fabrication) of the details of Indigenous lives.

We know now that those long-standing assumptions about Indigenous cultures as static and ahistorical were completely untrue. All the available evidence shows that Indigenous peoples had dynamic, eventful histories full of change long before they were ‘discovered’. They have also been quite conscious of their histories, using stories, songs, or physical markings to record all manner of past events and conditions, changes in the culture or the land, family genealogies, remarkable natural phenomena, and so on.