

Indigenous Lifeways and Ecology

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Certain qualifying considerations need to be made in any discussion of Indigenous religions. The term “Indigenous” is a generalized reference to the thousands of small-scale societies who have distinct languages, kinship systems, mythologies, ancestral memories, and homelands. These different societies comprise more than 500 million people throughout the planet today. Since these societies are extremely diverse, any general remarks are suspect of imposing ideas and concepts on them. Indigenous religions do not constitute a “world religion” in the same way as, for example, Buddhism or Christianity. This lack of a central authoritative organization or theistic doctrine has been used to marginalize or reject Indigenous spiritual ways. Central to Indigenous traditions, however, is an awareness of the integral and whole relationship of material, semiotic, and spiritual life. Ritual practices and the cosmological ideas that undergird society cannot be separated out as an institutionalized religion from the daily round of subsistence practices. Thus, it is not simply proximity or simplicity of relationship to local bioregions that makes Indigenous life and thought so significant for human-Earth relations in the 21st century, but rather human life lived responsibly and respectfully with the whole of the Earth community. The term, *lifeway*, points towards these insights into the many holistic contexts that ground traditional environmental knowledge evident in the cosmologies of Indigenous peoples. Cosmologies, or oral narrative stories, transmit the worldview values of the people and describe the web of human activities within the powerful spirit world of a local bioregion. In this sense, to analyze religion as a separate system of beliefs and ritual practices apart from subsistence, kinship, language, governance, and landscape is to misunderstand Indigenous religion.

Having accentuated difference and a sense of relational holism, it is also possible to recognize family characteristics among the lifeways of Indigenous peoples such as a concern for spontaneities of religious experience, remarkable intimacies with local bioregions often believed to be the source of sacred revelation, and developed ritual practices that instill the collective memories of the people and their homeland in individual bodies and minds.

These collective memories are also brought forward to consider the wellbeing of future generations. The Haudenosaunee/Iroquois, for example, call for decisions by their Tribal Confederacy leaders to be made in light of their impact on the future seventh generation of living beings. Self-determination by Indigenous peoples, in which they seek their governing voice in determining the fate of themselves and their homelands, has become a major lifeway question in the twenty-first century.

From the perspective of political economy, the cultural characteristics of Indigenous life that most directly relate to ecology are currently the most marginalized. That is, Indigenous peoples are often the target of external economic domination by multinational corporations that seek to exploit Indigenous homelands often with the help of the nation-state in which Indigenous peoples reside.¹ These issues of diversity, spiritual holism, and economic exploitation are central to any discussion of Indigenous traditions and ecology as many of the Indigenous peoples, their cosmologies, and ritual practices discussed below are actually in danger of being extinguished by absorption into mainstream societies. This forced adaptation into dominant societies continues

by destruction of Indigenous sacred sites, by curtailing language transmission of lifeway wisdom, and by endangering those powers and “persons” whom Indigenous communities recognize as giving them life.² Survival in the face of human assault, natural disaster, or deprivation has been a conscious concern of Indigenous peoples.

Lifeway: Religious Ecologies and Religious Cosmologies among Indigenous Peoples

Religious ecologies among Indigenous communities are ways of orienting and grounding whereby humans undertake specific practices of nurturing and transforming self and community within a particular cosmological context. While acknowledging the limitations and suffering of phenomenal reality, Indigenous lifeways relate to nature as the source of all flourishing. Through cosmological stories humans narrate and experience the larger matrix of mystery in which life arises and unfolds. These are what we can call religious cosmologies. These two, namely religious ecologies and religious cosmologies, can be distinguished but not separated. Together they can provide a context for navigating the tragic and chaotic dimensions of life. Evoking religious ecologies and cosmologies brings energies for encountering these inevitable challenges, thus transforming destructive experiences into creative possibilities for new beginnings.

Broadly speaking the elements of earth, air, fire and water are important in Indigenous religious ecologies as biocultural realities that literally and symbolically weave humans into the vibrant processes of Earth and cosmos. As biocultural symbols, air, earth, water, and fire can be seen as corresponding to religious ecological processes of orienting, grounding, nurturing, and transforming humans. Orienting refers to the inclination of humans to turn towards air, sky, and celestial bodies, namely, that which moves above us. Grounding refers to earth, the soil and land on which we stand and in which we dwell. Nurturing evokes water and food, so essential for life and upon which we all depend. Transforming connects to fire and those powerful forces that can be creative, destructive, or healing. Among Indigenous peoples there is a widespread and differentiated understanding that human life coming out of the elements of Earth and ultimately returning to these elements seeks orienting, grounding, nurturing, and transforming connections through religious ecologies and cosmologies. These understandings are presented here not as uniquely descriptive of any or all Indigenous lifeways, but as respectful questions and ways of inquiry to understand how Indigenous lifeways stand in relationships with the larger human experience of the Earth community.

Themes within Indigenous Lifeways Manifesting Orienting-Grounding-Nurturing-Transforming

Themes for implementing orienting, grounding, nurturing, and transforming relations between Indigenous religions and local bioregions are kinship, spatial and biographical relations with place, traditional environmental knowledge, and cosmological centering.

The theme of kinship draws attention to a key worldview value broadly expressed among Indigenous societies emphasizing the integrity of all reality as well as the intimate relations maintained with the natural world. In recalling a youthful experience with animals, the Lakota writer, Luther Standing Bear, articulated in his 1933 work, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, a teaching found among many Indigenous peoples. He wrote: “All this was in accordance with the Lakota belief that man did not occupy a special place in the eyes of Wakan Tanka, the Grandfather of us all. I was only a part of everything that was called the world.”³

The subtle interweaving of insight, affect, and ethics transmitted in lifeway orienting has given rise to a view of Indigenous peoples as “first ecologists” and purveyors of an environmental wisdom absent in the technologically developed, industrialized “first world.”⁴ Scientific ecology, namely, a measured awareness of the energy flows in ecosystems, and a scientific conservation, or strict quantifiable preservation of numbers of species, were not developed by Indigenous peoples. However, religious ecologies of Gwich’in peoples of Alaska, as a way of orienting-grounding-nurturing-transforming has had the effect of protecting the calving grounds of the Porcupine herd of caribou. As a form of Indigenous environmental ethics these practices stem from a sense of kinship with all life that is an orienting to a larger vision of relatedness than data captured by empirical science, or as resource for capital investment and development. In another example from South America, the limits on the use of materials for basketry by the Yekuana people of Venezuela, show an understanding of plant and animal life as possessing an interior numinous dimension that must be respectfully treated. Thus, grounding the making of baskets is an Indigenous ethic of reciprocal respect and reverence.

For most Indigenous peoples the physical separation of human habitats from the world of the other species does not constitute a loss or compromise of the worldview value of kinship. To distinguish the human “camp” (e.g., Lakota: *tun*) is not an ontological separation of beings, or an ethical judgment about superior and inferior relations between species. To think of human, animal, plant, and mineral bodies as separated by consciousness or personality would be a category error.⁵ For most Indigenous peoples the concept of “person” extends throughout the nations. Drawing on Lakota terms, what distinguishes the nations are their potentiality (*wakan*), what they do (*tun*), and how they express their interrelatedness to all life (*Wakan Tanka*).

This set of complex ideas, as expressed in Standing Bear’s quote, is taught to children through the use of kinship terms. Thus, he refers to *Wakan Tanka*, the abiding presence of mystery in life, as *Tunkashila* or Grandfather. This is an orienting to a larger world of stars that is also a grounding in the local bioregion of the Black Hills region. Etymologically, the term *tunkashila* also refers to rocks, so that the teaching of being a relative to all things is embedded in the Lakota memory of rocks and stones as persons. This teaching is further reinforced by oral narratives, or mythic cycles, which tell of the roles of stone in the sequence of creation, the emergence of the people, and transformative life.⁶ Through cosmological stories, then, this traditional environmental knowledge becomes a recurring focus during the maturing process of individuals.

Standing Bear says again: “Everything was possessed of personality, only differing from us in form. Knowledge was inherent in all things. The world was a library.” So also, Indigenous lifeways foster sustainable subsistence practices by gatherers, hunters, and agriculturists. In these

ways nurturing becomes respectful gathering and reverent eating. Care for the Earth is woven into the governance systems of Indigenous people, and when these systems break down often the restraint and continence guarding life is lost. The mythologies of the Dine/Navajo, for example, tell of a time when gender identity and sexual balance were lost. Monsters were born who fed on humans. This awareness of the loss of natural harmony among Indigenous peoples brought with it an awareness of fostering sustainable human-Earth relations for future generations. Transforming is at the heart of Indigenous lifeways as the means for addressing the loss of inner authenticity in direct relationship with the sustaining world.

Among the northern Algonkian hunters and trappers of North America nurturing and transforming relations were maintained by complex regulations for the treatment of the bones of slain animals. Sensitivities to local regions and their biodiversity have been transmitted in strikingly diverse ways by Indigenous peoples.⁷ The Proto-Malaysian peoples, for example, have transmitted into the present elaborate divination modes based on the flights and calls of birds. Spatial and biographical relations with place are also significant pragmatic and spiritual aspects of this environmental sensitivity. So also, the Temiar people of Malaysia speak of their quest to contact and transmit *kahyek*, which they understand as a cool healing liquid. *Kahyek* is the form taken by the upper soul of a spiritual being from the local Malayan rainforest. It can be imparted to human beings through dreams. The songs imparted in dreams enable selected humans to evoke and transmit this healing *kahyek*.

The Temiar locate themselves in social relations of kinship both with human and, through dream encounters, with the interactive spirits of their environment. These positions are reiterated each time they address one another, using terms such as “sister’s husband” or “mother of [the dreamer].” In their dream they establish kinship relations with spirits who emerge, identify themselves, and give the gift of song. Receipt of a dream song from a spirit guide marks the pivotal moment in the development of mediums and healers. The song, sung during a ceremonial performance by the medium and an interactive female chorus, links medium, chorus, trance-dancers, and patient as they “follow the path” of the spirit guide. When the ceremony concludes, spirits and humans “return home” (*me am*) to their respective abodes.⁸ Such intimate relations with the landscape are often evident in the names given to specific places, trees, rocks, or rivers. Naming the landscape not only maps local spaces, but it can also express deep inner relationships connected with one’s own life, with ancestors, and with the cycles of oral narratives in which cultural values are transmitted.⁹

Along with kinship and spatial and biographical relationships with places, another key feature of Indigenous religions and ecology is traditional environmental knowledge. Just as individual Temiar of Malaysia demarcate their homelands as the resident spaces of significant memories, they also know the gifts of the spirits of herbs, roots, and other medicines capable of transforming human lives. The chronology of individual lives vested in named places in the environment is paralleled by the collective memories of the people regarding ways to act in the forest, and in relation to specific plants and roots as cultigens.

Among the Yekuana of Venezuela a concern for the mythological meanings of places and plants accompanies traditional environmental knowledge. For example, the pragmatic use of plants and roots among the Yekuana as well as the location of grasses and roots for basket-making are

infused with numinous dynamics of danger and allurement that relate to personal and social accomplishment.¹¹ The Yekuana have developed a complex set of ethical teachings connecting the materials and designs for baskets with the cosmic struggle of their heroic ancestor, Wanadi and his troublesome offspring, Odosha. Set within dramatic cosmological stories, these webs of relationships are negotiated within the tense and ambiguous skein of the human condition. These stories teach Yekuana traditional environmental ethics braiding together cognitive and affective realms into a learned bodily practice of restraint. In effect, the weaving of baskets among the Yekuana is considered a finely developed aesthetic and contemplative act in which individuals mature in their understanding of self, society, and bioregion. This Yekuana ethics of limits with regard to natural consumption may not in itself appeal or apply to mainstream societies, but the emergence of an ethic of limits in relation to cosmological stories may hold significance for the current quest to develop a viable limit to consumption. In summary, the orienting-grounding-nurturing-transforming roles of religious ecologies and cosmologies provide lifeways with supple resilience for meeting the challenges of life.

Finally, what may be the most significant insight, which draws together these brief examples of Indigenous environmental knowledge, is cosmological centering, the felt experience of interacting with the larger whole of reality. Cosmology describes the context in which humans reflect upon their own bodies, the collective social order, and their understanding of how the world works. The interrelationship of the microcosm of the body with the macrocosm of the larger world is mirrored most immediately for Indigenous peoples in the local bioregion. For the Dine/Navajo, the encounter with mystery is as evident as the wind, which brought existence into being. One chanter described it this way:

“Wind existed first, as a person, and when the Earth began its existence Wind took care of it. We started existing where Darknesses, lying on one another, occurred. Here, the one that had lain on top became Dawn, whitening across. What used to be lying on one another back then, this is Wind. It was Darkness. That is why when Darkness settles over you at night it breezes beautifully. It is this, it is a person, they say. From there where it dawns, when it dawns beautifully becoming white-streaked through the Dawn, it usually breezes. Wind exists beautifully, they say. Back there in the underworlds, this was a person it seems.”¹²

Here the beauty of primordial existence is remembered and felt in the experience of Wind. This cosmology connects conscious thought and the darkness of night as a reversal moment whose transformative energies are still with the people. The tangible feel of breezes is the abiding beauty of this ancient harmony. Ritual practices and oral narratives simultaneously connect native peoples to a world that is pragmatic and problematic, meaningful and ambiguous, of ultimate concern and felt beauty. While some in mainstream industrialized societies have begun to reflect upon the larger implications of evolution as a coherent story, the possibility of an environmental ethic developing from that story remains a challenge. For mainstream societies caught in the emergencies of climate warming, surging populations, environmental degradation, nuclear armament, and ocean acidification and pollution, our darkness has yet to become a source of felt beauty. Indigenous peoples certainly have no technological fixes for these issues, nor is it just and equitable to yearn for a panacea from marginalized and oppressed peoples. What is evident, however, is wherever Indigenous peoples have endured, they have maintained a

loving experience of place and an understanding that spiritual forces abide in all of these places capable of orienting-grounding-nurturing-transforming.

About the Author

John Grim is a Senior Lecturer and Research Scholar at Yale University teaching courses that draw students from the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale Divinity School, and the Department of Religious Studies. He is Co-director of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology with Mary Evelyn Tucker, and series editor with her of “World Religions and Ecology,” from Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions. In that series he edited *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: the Interbeing of Cosmology and Community* (Harvard, 2001). He has been a Professor of Religion at Bucknell University, and at Sarah Lawrence College where he taught courses in Native American and Indigenous religions, World Religions, and Religion and Ecology. His published works include: *The Shaman: Patterns of Religious Healing Among the Ojibway Indians* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1983) and an edited volume with Mary Evelyn Tucker entitled *Worldviews and Ecology* (Orbis, 1994, 5th printing 2000), and a Daedalus volume (2001) entitled, “Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?” Together Tucker and Grim wrote *Ecology and Religion* (Island Press, 2017). John has been President of the American Teilhard Association for over thirty years.

Endnotes

¹ See Al Gedicks, *The New Resource Wars: Native and Environmental Struggles Against Multinational Corporations* (Boston: South End Press, 1993).

² See Donald A. Grinde and Bruce E. Johansen, *Ecocide of North America: Environmental Destruction of Indian Lands and Peoples* (Santa Fe, N. Mex.: Clear Light Publishers, 1995).

³ Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1988, c1933).

⁴ For a more sophisticated example of this approach see David Suzuki, *Wisdom of the Elders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).

⁵ See Dennis H. McPherson and J. Douglas Rabb, *Indian from the Inside: A Study in Ethno-Metaphysics*, Lakehead University, Centre for Northern Studies, Occasional Paper #14 (Thunder Bay, Ontario, 1993).

⁶ See James Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, Raymond J. DeMallie, and Elaine A. Jahner, eds. (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1980); and Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 61 (Washington, D.C., 1918).

⁷ See the discussions in Jace Weaver, ed., *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Issues* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997).

⁸ Marina Roseman, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993) 177.

⁹ See Keith Basso, "Stalking with Stories: Names, Places, and Moral Narratives Among the Western Apache," in *Text, Play, and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society* ed. E. Bruner (Washington, D.C.: American Ethnological Society, 1984).

¹⁰ For an interesting, though problematic, ethnography on the Dogon see Marcel Griaule, *Ogotemeli* (New York: Oxford, 1975), as well as the later works of his wife, Gertrude Deterlin.

¹¹ See David M. Guss, *To Weave and Sing: Art, Symbol, and Narrative in the South American Rain Forest* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1989).

¹² James McNeley, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 1981).