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Abstract

Living in a World of Worlds: What Indigenous Religions Bring to God Talk

The crisis of self and meaning in the contemporary world is at the same time a crisis of the self, and the objects upon which the self must depend, and the exchange of these objects with others....It is at this point that the indigenous people of the world reveal a resource and invite a contemplation for a form of globalization conducive to a viable human world. --Charles H. Long

This paper takes an inductive path, a storyteller's path, beginning with two stories that illustrate Indigenous theorizations of divine materiality and agentive landscapes. It then expands on the larger conceptual fields in which those stories exist, to argue that horizons of thought are broadened when Indigenous concepts shape our understanding of immanent metaphysics, and the process of thinking itself is placed within an immanent ethics of difference. Following the conclusions of the paper, for the sake of the reader unfamiliar with Indigenous religions, I provide an addendum in which I frame the formal issues of definitions and historicization with regard to Indigenous Peoples and propose the concept of I/indigeneity.

Apsáalooke (Crow)

The first story comes from my ten-year working relationship with Apsáalooke (Crow) elder Grant Bulltail who relays the story of the "ultimate source of energy," *Akbahii laashée*, and the tragic hubris by which men separated themselves from that energy by rejecting the creator's gift to them of tears. You see, the Creator undertook the dramatic discovery of things under the water that were seeking to become life, aided by a family of ducks who dove deep under the waters never to return until finally the youngest and smallest duck made its way gasping to the surface with the mud, the matter, that wanted to become life. The Creator then turned that duck loose to make all of the wetlands of the world. In addition to the duck, the creator appointed the wolf to make all of the mountains and plains and all of the big game that the wolf wanted to hunt. And after seeing all the marvels created by duck and wolf, the Creator sought an animal that would look up to the sky and marvel at the skies, and so created humans.

Humans were so scrawny and helpless compared to other animals that the Creator provided the women and the men with three gifts each. To women he gave the power of birth, the tipi (their mother home), and fire for warmth and food preparation. To men he gave courage, and weapons, and tears. The men scoffed at the gift of tears

and said that men did not cry or need tears. The Creator laughed at the hubris of the men and told them that the gift of tears was the ability to perceive power in the material world, such as which feathers to tie on a horse's mane to protect it in battle, and which plants could heal a wound, and thus the men were blinding themselves from the most important gift the Creator had given them. Over time the Creator saw that some people were good people and needed that gift. He relented and offered the possibility that in the most remote places, where only people of courage and discipline could gain access and must do so with fasting and offerings, the land might bestow upon them the gift of tears. "The Creator urged the Apsáalooke to seek the tears of his creation so that they may not be helpless in their lives. This practice is wrongfully called vision quest. The Apsáalooke call it to seek for tears. The few that are rewarded with the gift of tears are called "Baa-ish-da goosh-day" —eyes that have been opened to the supernatural" (Bulltail, June 11, 2010). One place where this gift has been received by some Crow people in the past is a mountain to the north of the town where I live, Cody, Wyoming. The Crow have been removed from this area since 1868 and placed on a reservation whose boundary now stops with the straight line that divides Wyoming and Montana. Grant and I collaborate each year to tell the story of Baa-ish-da goosh-day with a Pipe Ceremony on Heart Mountain, restoring circulation between tribal members and the mountain that adopted their ancestors by providing some of them with the gift of tears.

Vodou

The second story comes from Elana Jefferson-Tatum's recent Ph.D. dissertation, *Religious Matters: African (Vodoun) Materialities and the Western Concept of Religion* (Emory University, 2016), and is drawn from her extensive fieldwork in the Proto Novo-Adjarra region in the Republic of Benin. Of her methodology she writes: "While not ethnography in the strict sense, this theoretical and philosophical investigation utilizes qualitative data and secondary source materials to re-theorize *vodoun*, in particular, and African religious cultures and the category of "religion" more generally" (118). This aligns very closely with my own methodology as a non-Indigenous ally whose work in the field of comparative religious studies in the American West has brought me to qualitative exchanges with Indigenous experts, that I carry forward to the table of comparative theorizations of the divine, sacred lands, and ceremonial activism. Jefferson-Tatum and I both align ourselves with David Chidester's critique regarding the modern invention of African religion, which is intimately entailed with Indigenous religion writ large. This means that we see entirely new landscapes of categories and indexes of value that refuse the categorizations of imperial religious studies, and offer promising, surprising, and profound landscapes in which to see religion, and thus God-talk, "other wise."

This *vodoun* story is carried in two proverbs. You see, Jefferson-Tatum was relaxing one afternoon when an important proverb was presented to her. She recounts that “over the course of several months,” she had been experiencing “the day-to-day activities at the Atô Ogoun shrine—the consultations, offerings, sacrifices, and herbal baths to address sickness, infertility, and financial misfortune, the Friday prayer rituals of thanksgiving, and the dancing of the *vodoun* in the bodies of their devotees—

I was relaxing in the outdoor living space of the compound when Bernard Adjibodoun, a spiritual administrator of the Adjarra area and a leading ritual expert within the shrine, recounted the following proverb: “*Adjamanklo dé mèho lé bla mède man non tounkpon*” (literally meaning, “The leaves (*adjamanklo*) that the ancestors attach, nobody can open and see”) (119-120).

This proverb relates to the herbal infusion baths with *adjamanklo* leaves, the leaf of the ancestors, the leaf that creates the world, the leaf upon which the agency of the *vodoun* depend.

Consider for a moment the resonance between Bulltail’s description of a gift of tears given by the mountain that wash the eyes and allows them to see the powers available from the myriad animals and plants on the one hand, and in this case a gift that the ancestors can attach to their initiates that nobody else can open and see, through the power of the herbal infusion bath. The capacity of Heart Mountain to wash the eye to see the powers of the natural world, and the capacity of plants in the case of *vodoun* to create a sacred bond and relationship that others cannot open and see, speaks to the larger case to be made regarding what Indigenous religions bring to post-theistic considerations of the human future, which is that some power is place- and person-specific. In a world of worlds, power is limited to places, or as the important ethnography by Keith H. Basso put it, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, and thus cartographic limits to access are entailed, compared to claims of universal dominion common to monotheistic traditions. The imperial incentive to universalize a claim is inapplicable if the power is place-specific, and if belonging in a space is a matter of ancestry or at least ceremonial initiation. For now, let us return to the second proverb.

The second proverb important to this *vodoun* story soon followed in the conversation when Adjibodoun expanded on the foundational power of the leaves by saying that without the *adjamanklo* leaves, “there is no *vodoun*” (120). The spirited power of the *vodoun* pantheon does not exist without the plants. Materiality precedes epistemology and ontology; there is no knowing and no being without the leaves.

Contrast that proverb to monotheistic traditions in which it would be blasphemy to assert that the divine was dependent upon the land or the plants to exist. But since

this God Seminar has traveled well beyond monotheistic claims, and in fact might be preparing amongst its members a general deconstruction of the theism of the Crow and *voudun* stories above, let me make the next move with regard to what Indigenous Religions bring to the God seminar.

Having begun with two stories, let me lay down the cards of this paper. The first of which is to locate my method as deeply indebted to Charles H. Long and Toni Morrison in that I aim to depict a cartography of agentive landscapes marked by the radical heterogeneity of multiple words. Based on Long's discussion of the three founding cultures of America, I locate this research path as an American with three founding cultures, the oldest of which are the Indigenous cultures whose names define most of the major lakes and rivers of the continent, whose populations were decimated by war and disease, and whose ancestry is growing in the contemporary world. Arriving to the continent was the culture of European settlers, whose monopoly on violence and success in carrying disease secured their self-nomination as founding fathers of the United States. The third founding culture, the African and then African American cultures, were forced to take their place in America under the institutionalized dehumanization of chattel slavery, enforced through a constant threat of violence, from whose labors on the land were produced the profits that built the infrastructure of the nation's economy. My standing as an ally of Indigenous theorists and experts rests upon the three worlds in which I have always moved.

From Morrison I take to heart the critical project she outlined in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* as follows:

I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest. I intend to outline an attractive, fruitful, and provocative critical project, unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls. (3)

The following efforts to provide an adequate definition of Indigenous religions by a non-Indigenous person therefore rests on the ethical imperatives of restoring an anterior and contemporary presence to Indigenous meanings amidst the three founding cultures of 21st century American living. Indigenous stories situate the God seminar in a world of worlds, and de-center the question of God. To paraphrase Diakité and Hucks, I am not merely concerned with how to translate Indigenous idioms into Western forms but rather I am concerned with “how to apprehend indigenous concepts and their purchase as religious studies categories” (2013, 39).

In the case of Bulltail's rendering of *Baa-ish-da goosh-day*, the gift of tears, it would be reductive to identify the Creator in the story as the God of the story. The effort here is not translate the Indigenous idiom into Western forms. Rather, when Bulltail shifts from the genre of storytelling and expands on Apsáalooke cosmology, he drops the word Creator and develops the concept of *Akbahii Laashée*:

The Apsáalooke were thoroughly overwhelmed by Akbahii laashée. A conviction of a force that does the overcoming and whose powers are limitless. The quality of ultimate source caused the Apsáalooke to acknowledge that this entity has final authority over them and, therefore, the convictions with which they deal with nature and the universe are valid and binding, permanent and sacred. (Bulltail, June 11, 2010).

He writes further:

The true nature of all life is energetic and fluid; all the forces that ever existed resulted from the convergence of all the truths in nature, including man. . . . Nature is the most abstract truth, as well as the most practical. The workings of nature from season to season are its own evidence. (Bulltail, 5/24/11)

This larger cosmological picture suggests a thoroughly pragmatic engagement with the natural world as an energetic force that includes "human willing" as a constitutive element of its force, and provides us with a cartography of imminent metaphysics, integrating right relations for economic and political activity whose ceremonial duties the Apsáalooke find to be valid and binding, permanent and sacred.

When we look more deeply into the cosmological picture that undergirds the story of leaves without which the *vodoun* cannot survive, Jefferson-Tatum argues for attention to "Africana concepts and philosophical grammars" to propose a "world language," that is, "an indigenous lexicon of worldwide standing and theoretical purchase" (281). She outlines a triumvirate of concepts that are necessary for understanding the agentive landscape of *vodoun*: *gbɛ* (the nature world, the primordial foundation of community and ultimate existence), *sɛ* (the material formation of "persons" — that is, efficacious moral beings — which include non-human persons, 25), *nɔ* (mother), which she argues represents "concrete and materialized religious ideations of authority." She argue that "motherhood (*nɔ*) is a metaphysical institution of materialized power and authority that principally precludes notions of gender or sex"(26). In her comprehensive philology of the *adjamanklo* leaves, she provides evidence of their role in each of these categories, nature world, persons, and maternal authorities. (Those of you familiar with the African feminist critique of gender studies will recognize

this argument against gender, so to speak, in the works of Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi.)

Jefferson-Tatum theorizes a “Vodoun praxis and philosophy of materiality, meaning a network of relations and dynamics in which ‘material objects,’ ‘persons,’ and ‘gods’ are overlapping and interrelated ontological types within a dynamic, immanently metaphysical, cosmo-social landscape” (24). Given the imminent dangers of translation, which she has discussed at length previously (2015), she clarifies:

While “matter” is not an indigenous concept, this chapter proposes the presence of a Vodoun immanent metaphysics that is necessarily grounded in and materialized through the nature world (*gbɛ*) as the primordial foundation of community and ultimate existence. (25)

Hence, positioned within an immanent metaphysics in Fon- and Gun-based cosmo-social landscape, even the idea of person becomes entangled, such that human persons, “objects,” and kola trees are understood to be morally efficacious beings, which she argues creates a common ground in which action in general constitutes personhood, contingent upon the degree of moral efficacy exercised.

I propose that persons include beings and entities, whether *vodoun*, humans, “objects,” or kola trees, who participate in the social intercourse of daily life and are deemed responsible members of the community. Blurring the Western ontological lines between so-called “gods,” “persons” (i.e., human persons), and “things,” this chapter reveals a *vodoun* world in which “persons” are instituted by acts of eating and drinking and by practices of sacrifice and offering. I, therefore, analyze personhood not as a static *state of being* only attainable by humans based on a religio-cultural system of bio-anatomical privileging, but rather as a *spectrum of belonging* that is attainable by any being and that is often shifting and changing with the fluctuating demands of the nature community (*gbɛ*) at large.⁶³

In her comprehensive study, she populates that socio-cosmology with kola trees as persons, humans as persons only to the extent that they are morally efficacious in their relationship to nature, and the binding and sacred authority of motherhood as a non-gendered concept that applies to creation.

To conclude for the purposes of this presentation, what Indigenous Religions brings to the God seminar is the radical heterogeneity of a world of worlds that co-exist on one earth. To prioritize attention to Indigenous religions in questions of the God seminar is to un-settle the cartographic dominance of God terms, providing space for the

experts of Indigenous religions to restore a presence, and restore the heterogeneity of founding cultures. Chela Sandoval identifies this strategy, expressed by Indigenous activist subcommander Marcos of the Zapatista Army of Liberation in Mexico: “We seek a world in which there is room for many worlds” (Sandoval 2000). The urgency of this paper is that the one earth is in a state of abrupt climate crisis. We began with the story of the gift of tears on Heart Mountain, and the story of the foundation of the world in the leaves used for herbal immersion baths in Porto Novo, Benin. These stories from traditions thousands of miles apart, arise in the global networks of the Indigenous Peoples movement, and co-exist precariously amidst the decreasing biodiversity of their nature communities, now experiencing the volatility of drought, flood, and climate migrations. So the hope is pinned on the wager proposed by Bruno Latour: “We perhaps never differ about opinions, but rather always about things—about what world we inhabit. And very probably, it never happens that adversaries come to agree on opinions: they begin, rather, to inhabit a different world” (455).

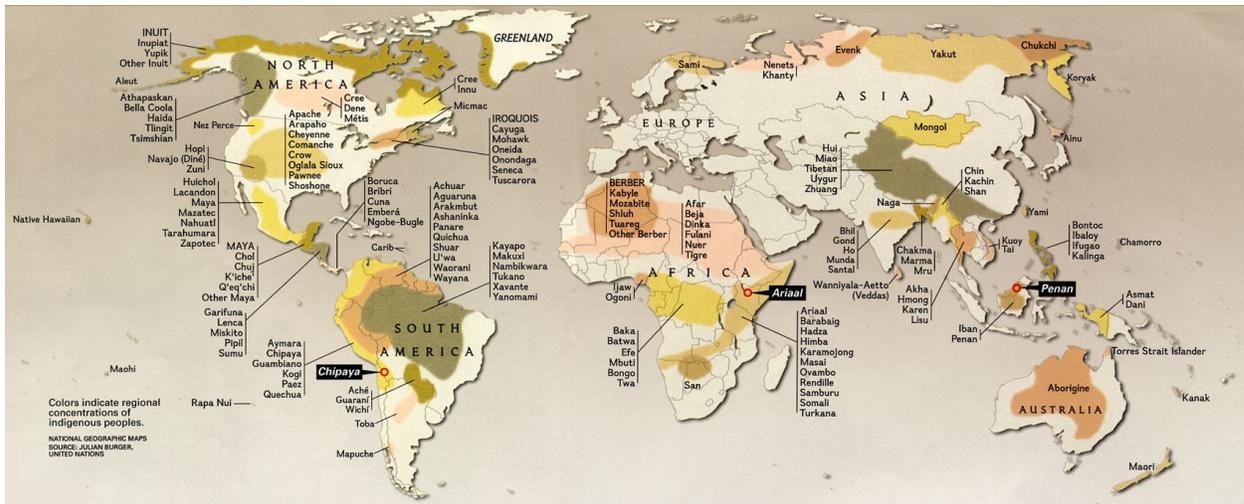
Addendum: Defining Indigenous Religions and I/indigeneity

The term “Indigenous peoples” was first used by a delegation of Native American leaders who traveled to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1977, as chronicled by Chief Oren Lyons in *Basic Call to Consciousness*.¹ They sought Indigenous representation at the United Nations, and their visit laid the foundation for the Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), the first meeting of which happened at the United Nations in 2002. The category of Indigenous peoples purposefully carries the plural *s*, indicating that each community is unique, although they share global concerns. The stories and landscapes of the Inuit in the circumpolar regions are different than those of the Yanomami in the Amazon, and both peoples are confronting threats to their subsistence lifestyles.

The United Nations estimates 5000 Indigenous groups composed of 370 million people are living in more than 90 countries on 5 continents, but the United Nations does not define what constitutes an Indigenous identity. Rather, on the basis of the shared experience of being clans, tribes, or nations with distinct, land-based ancestral lines that predate modernity, the UNPFII pairs self-identified Indigenous representatives with experts chosen by the United Nations to represent the region. The decade of 1995–2004 was declared by the United Nations as the “Decade of Indigenous Peoples,” and with many objectives for that decade unmet, 2005–2014 was declared the “Second Decade of Indigenous Peoples.” In 2007, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights

¹ The following section on Indigenous religion is drawn from Keller 2016.

of Indigenous Peoples that was ratified by 143 countries to protect and promote Indigenous human rights and territorial agency.



Given the disparate origins and lifestyles of such vastly different communities as the Sami reindeer-herding communities of northern Europe and the Mayan peoples of Guatemala, what does it mean to identify all of these people as Indigenous peoples? There is no monolithic blood quantum or ethnic litmus test that acts as the standard for claims to belong to Indigenous groups. There will not be a future science that will magically demarcate at the genetic level who is and who is not Indigenous. The category Indigenous peoples allows people who identify as such to come together to strengthen their international territorial agency, but it does not suggest that such coming together will be natural, simple, or uncontested. For example, competing land claims and competing casino ventures among American Indians illustrates the volatility of differences between Indigenous peoples (intra-Indigenous differences).

The very concept of Indigenous Religions stands on an ethic of difference akin to Luce Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference, but with regard to what we call for our purposes in the seminar tribal difference, whereby tribe indicates the close relations with which a person navigates and negotiates their sense of the ultimate significance of their place in the world.

Studying Indigenous religions "as an orientation to the ultimate significance of one's place in the world" (Long, 2007, 7) turns our attention toward the materiality of daily navigations and negotiations. According to historian of religions Phillip Arnold in *The Urgency of Indigenous Religions* (2003), the major characteristics of Indigenous religions include the following:

- Attention to the genealogical connection of the people to the land and its spirits.

- Attention to the proper food to be eaten and the ceremonial manner of gathering, preserving, and distributing the food for the common good.
- The use of sacred stories that are received in dreams or other states to instruct humans on the proper responses to the sacred that will sustain the community.
- An urgent need to cultivate the capacity to sense and communicate with the ancestors and other spiritual forces present but difficult to discern.
- An overriding appreciation of the Earth as the sacred creation upon which all sustenance is found.
- Ceremonial attention that tracks the elements responsible for human sustainability.
- A sense that all illness is a message regarding the out-of-balance condition of the human to the cosmos.

The question of who is Indigenous leads us to an edgy tension between Indigenous peoples on the one hand and a universal human capacity to make oneself of or from a place on the other hand. Put simply, all humans are indigenous to the Earth, but only some people are Indigenous. We will explore this tension using the neologism I/indigenous to identify the tension between the reality of Indigenous people who endured conquests and contrast that to a universal human indigeneity, the ability of all humans to “make oneself at home,” including migrating and adapting to new conditions. This unsettling and unsettled tension between these two ways of characterizing human indigeneity brings us a clearer insight on contemporary human beings in a home we are making and unmaking.

Arnold (2003) argues that the Indigenous orientation to the sacred in the world is the central fountainhead of all religious traditions. All of the iconic sacred experiences described in the world religions are manifest within a particular place and time: creation itself, burning bushes, miraculous births, floods, and avatars are physical appearances of the sacred. What is different is that some world religions develop institutions and doctrines that centralize knowledge in a clerical class, sometimes universalizing the claim for universal dominance. From this perspective, the world religions are not more advanced. Rather, they are heavily scaffolded. Arnold notes that in the meantime, the everyday religious community in the world religions is still busy seeing the Virgin Mary in a slice of toast that can be purchased on eBay. What we see in Arnold’s argument works similarly to LeAnne Howe’s tribalography—when we pay attention to immanent metaphysics, we link the historical memory of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

We are in a new degree of global climate trouble together, and to describe this catastrophe of unhousing ourselves, I want to suggest that we are living in the place and

time of the I/indigenous. The capital I refers to Indigenous people, "those peoples, societies, and cultures who were prior to the rise of the West and have in one way or another survived ...the 'rise of the West,'" (Long 2003, 178). The capital "I" is placed at the front of the word to seat Indigenous peoples first at the table (Smith, Cousineau, and Rhine 2006). The lower-case "i" represents the indigeneity of all humans as earthlings. The forward-leaning bar acknowledges the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, but it simultaneously links the Indigenous to the indigenous. I/indigenous helps us to make sense of the most complex contact zones on Earth.

I/indigenous is meant to describe the coexistence and interrelationship of the Indigenous people of Brazil, struggling to survive and protect their rainforest resources with their Brazilian neighbors. The Indigenous people of Brazil are different from but connected to the Candomblé houses as their communities reconnect with African roots. As earthlings, the settler-colonials of the dominant classes have buried their dead in Brazil, in some cases for several hundred years. Burying one's kin has significant consequences for one's indigeneity. Burial integrates the body of the settler-colonials into the land. Such integration does not make a Japanese Brazilian into an Indigenous person, but it is a ceremonial participation in the universal indigeneity of all people. All of these people will suffer from the consequences of droughts such as the drought of 2015 that threatened 20 million people in São Paulo alone. In a globalized world, we contend with the layered realities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous neighbors in a myriad of constellations across the globe. If we think about our overlapping coexistence as I/indigenous, then it might orient us as global citizens as we face the making and unmaking of our shared home. If we think about the meaning of indigenous as "being of or from a place," and because developed-world fossil fuel burning is leading to abrupt climate crisis for all, then becoming I/indigenous is itself simultaneously a necessity and impossibility.

Indigenous Resources

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