Spirituality

This chapter traces theological and philosophical uses of the notion of “spirit” in studies of Native religious belief, and argues that these uses that have separated matter from the immaterial, and thus the knowable from the illogical. Such binaries fuel inaccurate ethnographic representations, the consumption of Native American spirituality, and indigenous claims for sacred sites. Rather than framing indigenous religious action in terms of “spirit” and “spirituality,” this chapter argues for the value of an ontological attention to indigenous intersubjectivity and the multiple ways indigenous people maintain practical, logical, and physical relations among humans and other-than-human persons. The chapter proposes replacing the term “spiritual” with the word “related” in describing indigenous world views.

Keywords: colonialism, indigenous, intersubjectivity, materialism, ontology, religion, sacred, spirit, spirituality, relatedness

indigenous peoples of what is now known as the western hemisphere continue to demonstrate the religious vitality of their relations in practical, material, and social ways. While no single chapter could account for the diversity of Native people’s worldviews and practices, neither in historical nor contemporary frameworks, addressing the concept of “spirituality” in American Indian history provides an opportunity to dismantle one of the primary ways that indigenous people represent themselves and are represented by others. Specifically, this chapter explicates the linguistic, historical, political, and ethnographic reasons why scholars should cease using the term “spiritual” to describe indigenous worldviews. Necessarily, this chapter will also discuss indigenous religiosity, as it seems to be expressed outside the interpretive sieve of colonialism. We will see, for example, that for a very long time indigenous people organized their social lives in accordance with not only human persons, but also other-than-human persons. Such a
core component of non-, pre-, and postacculturated indigenous societies enables this chapter, in the final analysis, to demonstrate the wisdom of replacing the adjective “spiritual” with the word “related” in describing indigenous world views. This shift will not only provide more accurate descriptions of Native life, but will enable scholars to avoid the overly personal, hierarchical, and fantastical notions that are typically used to describe most nonindigenous religious practices.

I have divided this chapter into four distinct parts, two focused on the history of the terminology in writing about Native “spirituality” and then two on the politics of representation in writing American Indian history. I first explain what we do not know about the term “spiritual”; “spirit” terminology seems to specify very little. Next, I cover what we do know about the term and its role in the conceptual binaries of spirit/nature and spirit/matter. I then provide the historical and political reasons why “spiritual” at best avoids clarity about and at worse sustains colonial authority over indigenous people. Last, I show how the term’s usage might sometimes be justified, particularly in discussions of religious conversion or assimilation (even though I still advocate the term’s replacement).

Defining “Spirit”: Chasing Ghosts

Perhaps the most suspicious aspect of “spiritual” as a descriptive term is that it seems not to describe something in particular. “Spiritual” fails to mean anything reliable due to the range of meanings the term has held throughout various languages and historical eras. Much ado has been made of linguistic differences regarding “spirit” across ancient languages. According to the biblical passage of John 22, after dying, the ghost of Jesus appears to his disciples and breathes on them and tells them to receive “the Holy Spirit.” Or was it “a Holy Spirit?” Or perhaps from the Hebrew *ruah*, it meant “a breath of life,” the lower case suggesting quotidian breathing? The confusion is not solely John’s, nor solely before the fourth century, as the Greek work *pneuma* did mean, “wind,” “breath,” and “spirit.” In the New Testament alone, the Revised Standard Version translates *pneuma* as “breath” three times, “mind” two times, “wind” two times, and “spirit” over 370 times. In this early and widely circulating literature, then, “spirit” could signify the “mind,” the opposite of the body or flesh. As we will see below, this opposition to “materiality” remained central for centuries and became one of the primary reasons “indigenous spirituality” emerged as a term that has served the colonizing of indigenous people and the settling of their lands.

During the European middle ages, a “spirit” became not simply the breath, but a vital essence of all humans and animals. Thomas Kasulis draws our attention to how the Greek
sense of “breath,” or *pneuma*, was displaced by Plato, Aristotle, and others in favor of the “life force” meanings associated with the Hebrew term *ruah*. The former sense of “spirit” denoted an actual thing, breath, while the latter denotes the metaphysical and mysterious core of our being. From the codification of the early Bible in the fourth century, through Plutarch of Athens’s defenses shortly after, to William of Champeaux’s and Walter of Mortagne’s privileging of the spirit over the body seven centuries later, philosophers (or theologians) rationalized the spirit as soul, the body as profane. Across Europe, by the end of the thirteenth century, “spirit” became both the ghost and supernatural presence, and then, in the fourteenth century, it evolved into the disembodied phantasm of a dead person.

Three centuries later, European religious scholars expanded “spirit” into even broader uses. From the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, these thinkers drew from a wide set of meanings for spirit talk. For example, they wrote that humans derived their emotions from their spirits, conflating irrationality with being overcome by one’s own spirit. In a related etymology, “spirits” were also the liquors or intoxicants that decrease logical capacity and increase the power of the emotions. By the end of the seventeenth century, humans could be “spirited away” by demons. Or one could embody the “spirit” of an abstract concept, such as the *esprit de corps*, or the spirit of the age. “Soul,” from Old English, became interchangeable with “spirit.” And since souls could travel without bodies, a spirit could also be an angel, demon, or ghost. By extension, one was “spirited” if one was amazed or frightened by such encounters. In European culture a “spirit” gradually became a supernatural being that could attack you and tear you to pieces.

By the time Europeans entered the Americas, the term “spirit” could have referred to something inside of us, or outside of us; something good, or bad; something that kills us, or takes us away; a physical presence or a nonphysical attitude; a spell of irrationality or an alcoholic drink. This range of meanings is quite a feat for one word. And in the intervening five-plus centuries, the situation seems not to have been clarified one bit. My Pentecostal friend tells me that he is often filled with the Holy Spirit, that singular presence of God. But the female whale watcher has a spiritual experience when she sees the blue whale jump weightlessly into the air near her boat. My neighbor is confident that a spirit visits him at three in the morning. Recent polls suggest that more and more people describe themselves as “spiritual” rather than religious. Across college and high school courts and fields, we are asked if we have as much school spirit as our rival’s supporters. Frankly, “spirit” seems to mean so much that it simply fails to mean any one thing at all.

A scholar hoping to describe indigenous worldviews and practices in terms that are reliable, useful, and clear, should therefore give up the term “spiritual.” Using “spirits” and “spiritual” ethnographically leads to an interpretive sloppiness that simply projects
European confusion onto other people, a form of colonization, since the power to represent and distribute those representations is uneven and maintained through histories of violence. And as we will see below, when ethnographers intentionally use the term, their work either fails to take seriously indigenous ways of self-description, fails to ask culturally relevant questions about indigenous concepts, and in both possible cases offers a lazy approach to native studies.

Categorical and Conceptual Slippage

Using the term “spirit” in ethnographic writing is particularly problematic because the term holds competing positions in two well-known binaries: spirit/nature and matter/spirit. As others have described at length, modernist anthropological studies tend to manage complex data by abstracting cultural specifics into comparative frameworks based on an array of often oppositional categories. In many ways, this interpretive method relies on a primary, and false binary between objectivity and subjectivity. Nurit Bird-David squarely puts this conflation of science and objectivist thought in the lap of René Descartes, who linked human existence to solely intellectual activity by declaring “I think, therefore I am.” Bird-David points out that Cartesian objectivism, by accentuating separated individuality, consistently fails to make sense of indigenous people, whose lives are typically organized around the existence of relations with other humans and other-than-human persons.

Kenneth Morrison has labeled this disjunction conceptual “slippage.” Calling for a post-Cartesian approach to ethnographies and ethnohistories of indigenous communities, Morrison pointed out that “Descartes engendered the dualisms that atomize what should be understood as the unified modalities of human life: objectivity/subjectivity, matter/spirit, science/religion (among many others).” Morrison and Bird-David call on scholars to interrogate seriously their reliance on inherited conceptual categories of analysis and to accentuate the dividual, not individual, ways of being, knowing, and valuing in indigenous communities. They both would counter Descartes’s logocentric individualism with the assertion that “We relate, therefore we are.” Following from that injunction, this chapter will explain how we might dismantle the overlapping binaries spirit/nature and matter/spirit.

One of the most diligent investigations of the dichotomy between spirit and nature is Tim Murphy’s *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion*. Murphy brazenly states his intention to “explicate the political embedded in Spirit, consciousness, (inner) experience, ‘Man,’ etc., and lift it out of the texts of the phenomenology of religion so that it can be evaluated, as an epistemological, methodological, scholarly, and political
pathology.” To do this difficult but rewarding work, Murphy developed a history of “Spirit’s” philosophemes, or principles of reasoning. Murphy showed that as opposed to the reading of “spirit” as otherworldly or mystical (an aspect of the matter/spirit binary), the Hegelian sense of the term “spirit” connoted mindful and capable of self-knowledge, also called geist. Since this particular use of geist emanated from such foundational European philosophers as Georg Hegel through Martin Heidegger to Karl Marx and later Jacques Derrida, Murphy zeroed in on a central theme throughout critical analysis and “Western thought.” Geist as the ability to know oneself and critically reflect on one’s own life elevated “spirit” from the emotional realm to be associated with the faculty of reason and consciousness. Throughout much of political philosophy, Murphy’s distinction is quite important.

We see in Murphy’s work how the politics of geist establishes what he calls a “violent hierarchy of subordination of its Others: matter, nature, and people of nature.” Rather than using “spirit” to refer to the irrational and emotional aspects of human activity, Hegel’s reformulation triangulated the meaning of “spirit” as having historical consciousness, rather than being solely a term for irrationality. People with geist/spirit could exercise reason; though conversely, those people closest to nature lived in a mystical/spiritual world and lacked souls and the ability to reason. We hear the echoes, then, of the famous debate in 1550 at Valladolid, where Bartolomé de las Casas made his case against Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda that the aboriginal inhabitants of the Americas could reason enough to be slaves and adopt Christianity rather than to be killed outright like animals without souls. Notions of “spirit” are clearly inseparable from the long and painful history of labor and economic imperialism across the globe.

In both the hard and the soft sciences, an objective study entails separating ourselves from what we are studying, being conscious of not “going Native.” As Murphy points out, all major German universities were divided into the natural sciences and the sciences of the mind. This division set up not only who could know, but also how one studied, the actual methods of scientific inquiry. By being people of nature, indigenous people fell to the side of being studied, incapable of knowing themselves, a field of study that we might think of like an anthropologist’s laboratory. Murphy expertly shows the implications of the geist/natur division.

We cannot ignore the relationship between the phenomenology of religion and the historical phenomenon of European colonialism and imperialism. The set of representations produced by the phenomenology of religion, despite all protests to the contrary, will turn out to have a very strong resemblance to the system of colonial representations as described by colonial/postcolonial discourse theory.
Murphy then describes how the presumptions and thus methods of an academic
discipline necessarily produce, in Derridean terms, an always already self-justifying
evidence: Indians must be theistic, individualist, and hierarchical (in the terms of this
chapter) because our suppositions about religion entail a hierarchical theism that
concomitantly entails the concept of individual salvation. Accordingly, since all categories
in the Great Chain of Being are hierarchically differentiated, Natives must also be
somewhere between humans and the lesser categories of animals and plants, or simply
put, nature. Murphy proves then that “A form of power/knowledge is at work: scholars
laboring within this discursive structure produce ‘knowledge,’ an authorized, legitimated
representation of reality, of the reality of the Other.” He continues, “This ‘knowledge’
then reinforces, authorizes, and implicitly legitimates the system of colonial
representations.”

Murphy goes on to argue that “This circular movement creates (or reproduces) a
discursive hegemony within which it becomes difficult to falsify claims and which
systematically limits the ability to persuade to the contrary. The data for such refutation
is prepackaged by the methods used to select it out of the plethora of possible choices of
data.” For example, because the explorers and trade merchants were traveling the world
in the seventeenth century as purveyors of self-constituted empires, by definition they
would meet conquerable people and lands. And in a similar manner, anthropologists with
scientific methods and theories must leave their centers of knowledge production to enter
“fields” that by definition are natural in contrast to the cultured and civilized spaces of
the universities. An objective view of the world cannot help but see objects.

In addition to producing a history of categorical and conceptual slippage, Murphy sheds
light on the circular production of knowledge/power, where the disciplined scholars rely
on theories and methods that could be expected to produce only self-justifying data. In
the study of Native peoples, either indigenous ways-of-being duplicated other religions as
subjective, personal, faith-based, and therefore spiritually minded (rather than material
and practical), or they lack geist, the ability to inquire intellectually, posited by the
founders of Western philosophy. In other words, choose your poison when using
“spiritual” to describe indigenous worldview: either theologians or Cartesian thinkers
have determined how to think about indigenous religiosity. As Murphy puts it, once again
so eloquently:

At a metaphysical level, it is a distinction between consciousness or mind and the
body or materiality in general. At the taxonomic level, it is the distinction between

(p. 438) “nature religions” and “ethical religions,” or “higher” and “lower”
religions. At the level of geopolitics, it is the distinction between Europeans
(Geist) and non-Europeans (Natur), most often as it turns out, non-Europeans of color.¹⁰

Murphy’s tripartite division of mind/body/spirit helps us untangle the complicated concomitant production of knowledge in the academic study of religion and in the colonization of continents. Further, Murphy helps us understand how religious studies’ (and anthropology’s) “objects” of study cannot be understood easily outside of their own conceptual lenses. As Thomas Kasulis reminds us in his article “Philosophy as Metapraxis,” “Through most of the modern period and especially in the past half century, philosophers have tended to analyze religion primarily as a system of belief instead of as a system of praxis.”¹¹ And as we see below, a handful of scholars in Native Studies have proven Murphy and Kasulis unfortunately correct.

Let us move now to the third set of binaries, matter versus spirit. To help explicate the peril of approaching indigenous religiosity as a belief system similar to Judaism or Christianity, Kenneth Morrison points out how traditional scholars relied on the matter/spirit dichotomy to frame indigenous religiosity as theistic, individualistic, and fantastical or imaginary (a matter of subjective belief). Rarely does one read such a systematic dissection of another scholar’s work as Morrison accomplished with his analysis of the work of Calvin Martin, one of the most widely cited scholars of indigenous ethnohistory in the 1970s and 1980s. Morrison demonstrated that Martin had read the ethnographic record of Algonquian religious life, “in ways that reveal the religious ethnocentrism that has colored most interpretations from the seventeenth century to the present.”¹²

Morrison shows that Martin sought to move beyond a materialist reading of early contact history between the Algonquian and European people in order to present a “spiritual” explanation of the encounter. Martin claimed that indigenous people engaged Europeans in ways that reflected their aboriginal worldviews. But Morrison points out that Martin’s use of “spiritual” referred “variously (and unsystematically, since most people are neither metaphysicians nor theologians) to a variety of reality assumptions.”¹³

After understanding how slippery the term “spiritual” proves to be, we are not surprised that Morrison demonstrates how the term fails to portray indigenous realities accurately. Morrison’s argument is worth quoting directly on this matter.

Spiritual often refers, in the first place, to non-physical beings, that is, the spirits, and frequently to the other-world dimension in which they are supposed to exist, that is, the supernatural. In the second place, spiritual commonly refers to subjective religious “belief,” and thus to refined religious piety, sentiment, and/or religious achievement, that is, a deeply/highly spiritual person. In a related way, belief sometimes points to some posited aspect of reality that is construed variously as non-empirical and imaginative objects of fancy, or of faith. Both
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spiritual and belief thus tend to encompass broad entailments that lie at the
dualistic heart of Western cosmology, meanings that are particularly rehearsed in
the pervasive assumption that reality has both objective and subjective, physical
and spiritual, characteristics.¹⁴

(p. 439) In this passage, Morrison reveals how the combination of “spiritual” and “belief”
provided Martin with the conceptual framework to make such unwarranted claims as
“The Indian’s was a world filled with superhuman and magical powers which controlled
man’s destiny and Nature’s course of events.”¹⁵ Rather than seeking to understand the
behavioral emphasis, or praxis, called for by Kasulis and other scholars, Martin simply
repeated the objectivist, hierarchical claims made by the anthropologists of Algonquian
life who preceded him. His interpretation was objectivist since he placed the agency in
the abstract notion of “powers,” not in a human ability to negotiate and share power with
other subjects. His interpretation was hierarchical because he claimed the existence of a
“superhuman” and thus a “supernatural” plane that has an ontological if not axiological
superiority to humanity. Morrison calls Martin out for his interpretation of Algonquian
“cosmic subservience,” which prevented his readers, and students in general, from
understanding indigenous life as practical and dependent upon active, reciprocal sociality
with humans and other-than-human persons.

Relying heavily on A. Irving Hallowell’s work among Ojibwe (Anishinaabe), Morrison
measures Martin’s approach against Hallowell’s central claim that, at least for the
Ojibwe, we might best understand indigenous reality as a social multidimensionality
undifferentiated by hierarchical principals. Hallowell had taught that because the Ojibwe
world includes both human and other-than-human persons who all share types of power
but differ in their quantities of power, any analysis of their religious life should start from
the premise that humans must work dialogically to achieve full and happy lives.
Hallowell’s essay “Ojibwa Ontology” remains the benchmark for the study of indigenous
rationality since it details how the linguistic category for animate persons includes
humans as well as other-than-humans such as rocks and thunder. Hallowell’s essay
explains how Ojibwe community members maintain these larger social relations through
communicative acts, including ceremonies. Because Hallowell highlights the perceptual,
behavioral, linguistic, ethical, and cognitive aspects of Ojibwe ontology, Morrison is able
to use his outlook to mount a powerful critique of Martin’s supernaturalistic thinking:

Because Hallowell demonstrates that the Ojibwa category “persons” embraces all
types of being, intentionality, desire, purposefulness, compassion, and
malevolence, he was able to conclude that Western cosmological notions,
particularly the categories of “nature” and the “supernatural,” do not fit,
represent, or explain the Ojibwa cosmos.¹⁶
Morrison had for years built much of his own theoretical approach on the back of Hallowell’s groundbreaking studies. But Morrison’s rereading of Hallowell provided him with the insight that among the Dakota, Zuni, Yoeme (Yaqui), Wixárika (Huichol), and others, indigenous peoples tended to emphasize human responsibility that eschewed commonplace expectations of theism. Morrison writes in 1992, “Concepts common to Religious Studies must be viewed critically. God, prayer, worship, piety, hierophany and the sacred and the profane, among others, are religious terms that might not easily be applied to Native American religions.” Unfortunately, Morrison’s vitally important conclusions failed to travel well to other disciplines. Otherwise, this present chapter would be unnecessary.

Interestingly, Morrison points out that Martin himself was conscious of the categories’ uneasy fit, if not their potential to misrepresent. In a textual note, Martin writes that he uses “supernaturalistic” as a “convenience for the reader. To the Indian the spirit world was not distinguished from the natural world; for him there was nothing supernatural.” How has convenience become acceptable when simultaneously wrong? We are confronted time and time again with hermeneutical dishonesty in ethnographic representations of indigenous worldviews.

Martin’s framework, the approach of using terms and categories that the ethnographer or historian knows are inaccurate but continues to use regardless, can be found in many other texts in indigenous studies. For example, Barbara Meyerhoff tells us that “god,” “prayer,” and “veneration” are inappropriate to Huichol ritual, but then goes on to use them and other “supernatural” and dichotomous language, such as “sacred” and “profane.” In another case, Richard K. Nelson writes one of the strongest ethnographic demonstrations that proves that Koyukon people share power with other-than-human persons through dialogic and communicative acts of reciprocity. He writes that “the natural and supernatural worlds are inseparable,” but then uses “supernatural” to describe Koyukon relations with animals.

If we are serious about understanding indigenous worldviews, then we must take seriously the impact of our categories and adjoined concepts in order to avoid slippage. From a Native Studies perspective, we must pay attention to our terms’ propensity to misconstrue indigenous realities and therefore further the colonization of Native peoples and their lands. We must ask how the use of “spirituality” continues the logic of settler colonialism that insists on defining indigenous people as both inferior and premodern, and inevitably concludes that indigenous cultures have no future other than assimilation, a genteel version of cultural elimination.
Late-Capitalist Consumption of “Indian Spirituality”

What makes “spirituality” one of the most persistent of colonial mindsets is the unfortunate fact that distorted perceptions of native people are often rooted in the way indigenous people around the world represent themselves. Due to the power of settler societies and the ongoing theft of Native lands, indigenous people have often defended themselves by using the linguistic framings of “sacred” property and “spiritual” connections to specific landscape and to “nature” in general as central elements of their own national sovereignty. Indian people have thought that these framing devices would protect them by cloaking their nations in ideas the colonizers would find difficult to ignore. Before we examine whether such goals have been achieved (spoiler alert: they have not), what is the history of this turn to “spiritual” language?

Whether as a serious consequence of internal colonization or simply an attempt to communicate with cultural outsiders in terms they might better understand, the tradition of connecting spirituality and indigenous people runs deep in our past. Scholars have shown that the earliest representations of native people that circulated throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were that they lacked civilization and therefore were somehow untainted by the material concerns for possessions, laws, and capitalism. During these same early reports, indigenous peoples of the Americas (and other lands) were portrayed as some sort of animal-human hybrids, close to nature and more wild than fully evolved people. In the most lurid accounts, indigenous people were cannibalistic monsters; in more romantic characterizations, they were innocent children of nature. Little has changed. One can draw fairly quickly a direct line from the earliest and most racist views of indigenous peoples to the continued use of “Indian” mascots, indigenous-themed fashions and graphic “Native” designs that have no connection to actual indigenous communities. Examples of this practice abound, from American Indian Halloween costumes featuring feathered headdresses, “peace pipe” accessories, and tomahawks to the trivialization of Indian dispossession in cartoons and television comedies.

When nonindigenous people claim a connection to indigenous people based on Native spirituality, they rarely cite specific indigenous communities or discuss their political, economic, and social materiality. These claimants argue that they are interested in reading about and consuming indigenous nonmateriality, including American Indian spirits, dreams, beliefs, legends, and myths. They are rarely interested in reading about or participating in indigenous struggles for sovereignty, water rights, or political recognition. Native Studies scholar Lisa Aldred, working in the US context, frames the colonialist desire for all things indigenous as “imperialist nostalgia,” a romanticization
that assumes a pose of innocent yearning thus concealing its complicity with often brutal domination."\textsuperscript{23}

In addition to avoiding this imperialist nostalgia, we should also heed Sherman Alexie’s warning that the vast market of non-Indian readers tempts many writers (including indigenous authors) to misrepresent Native Americans in romantically religious terms.\textsuperscript{24} These representations have serious consequences because they then circulate not just within popular culture, but also within the circles of public policy and legal discourse. For example, as Cherokee historian Tom Holm has shown, Native people died in higher numbers than other soldiers when serving in Vietnam. Holm argues that mortality was a direct consequence of Native soldiers being placed in harm’s way because their commanders believed they could listen to the wind and had a natural ability to track prey.\textsuperscript{25}

A market for Indian spirituality enables both retailers and consumers to feel good about supporting a subjugated group. They can sell, wear, perform, or symbolize their care for others by buying, consuming, and profiting from an inauthentic simulation of the Other. They do not have to fight for Native rights; but they can buy Native purification for a weekend in a sweat lodge. If we think of Native peoples as somehow more spiritual, and thus less material, than we have to care less about their material needs. By not considering the materiality of Native communities, settlers could, and can continue to, ignore the realities of life for the original Americans. The public chooses not to look at those histories that reveal its continued complicity in the displacement and subjugation of humans. Ironically, from this point of view even economically successful Native people can be dismissed. An image of the “rich Indian” has been used to combat pro-gaming ballot initiatives in California and to criticize tribes that have launched successful enterprises. How, critics asked, could real Indians have large houses and cars?

The other side of the material/spiritual binary is that the distinction elevates the Indian to a position of civilizational healer. By thinking of Native people as innately tied to all things spiritual, we fail to recognize that no group has the upper hand on deeply cosmological questions (not Buddhists, not Hindus, not Southern Baptists). At the same time, however, settler societies maintain the upper hand because settlers, after all, both founded and now control the nation’s legal and academic structures. And logically, if those speaking with legal and academic authority define Indians as spiritual people, they reduce indigenous traditions and land claims and wisdom traditions to sacred matters rather than rational science. As a consequence, indigenous ways of relating are objectified as personal spirituality that, like all faith-based belief, has limited protections from state power. By using claims of supernatural, sacred, and spiritual, indigenous people may be intending to make sense to outsiders, but they are in fact falling prey to capitalist and colonial modes of objectification.
When the Apache people of Arizona sought to protect their respected mountain, Dzil Nchaa Si An, from being denigrated for the construction of a large telescope, they had hoped their claims would be protected under the provisions of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), a statute containing a pledge that the federal authorities would not interfere in the practice of Native religion. The Apaches quickly learned, however, the AIRFA is a nonbinding resolution that contains no penalty clause. In various court battles, two “expert anthropologists,” Elisabeth Brant and Keith Basso, clarified how Apaches live in a world with “no distinction between the natural and supernatural.” But then relying on similar binaries, they proceeded to lay out how the mountains “are alive.”

[The mountains] create the rain clouds. They bring life and the animals and the plants which people with proper reverence and ritual may harvest to continue their own lives. They provide healing waters, curing plants, sacred animals, a home to the eagles whose feathers are sacred, and an uplifting and joy to the spirit.  

Denying one binary, that of supernatural/natural, but relying on other Christian notions of religiosity such as spirituality and sacredness, the Apache case rested on the Indians’ ability to introduce their beliefs into court as evidence. But that evidence was rooted in ideas about who, not what, a mountain can be. One of the financial sponsors investing in the telescope, the Vatican, rested their case on exactly this lack of hierarchical distinction. Their Jesuit lawyer stated clearly,

It is precisely the failure to make the distinctions I mention above [nature, earth, cultures, human beings] that has created a kind of environmentalism and a religiosity to which I cannot subscribe and which must be suppressed with all the force that we can muster.  

Losing the battle of Dzil Nchaa Si An seems not to have deterred Native groups from thinking that “spirituality” would defend indigenous land claims in American courts.

Ten years after the Apaches’ defeat, the Navajo (Diné) Nation sought an injunction under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to prevent the US Forest Service from spraying the San Francisco Peaks’ Arizona Snowbowl with artificial snow made from treated sewage. Their approach, relying on the terms spelled out by Greg Guedel of the Native American Legal Services Group, rested on the failed thinking that “Native people viewed the earth as sacred, and embraced its preservation as a spiritual imperative.” Once again the argument was dismissed. Today the “Snowbowl” is regularly covered with snow manufactured from sewage water.
Indigenous people, even some well-meaning scholars, seemingly cannot help themselves from using the terms “spiritual,” “holy,” or “sacred” when talking about indigenous worldviews and land claims. When asked during the research on the famous Maine Indian Land Claims case in the 1970s, one Passamaquoddy woman declared that her relationship to the land was “spiritual.” As the conversation continued, she explained that she needed to communicate with the land, feed the land, and dance with the land. And she explained that if she did not do such activities, the land would cease to be in relation with her. The young researcher, Kenneth Morrison, responded that these very real, very physical responsibilities are not included in the concept of “spirituality.” “Spiritual” and “spirituality” he pointed out, do not get at the actuality of the relationship she described. The woman agreed but added that there was a not direct translation for the word she used in her language to categorize such activities.

Elder Navajos might teach their children to pick sage at sunrise. They ask verbal permission from the plant, breathe on a pinch of corn pollen, and then put that pollen at the base of the plant where the sage comes out of the ground, on the sunrise side of the plant. These are intensely physical and precise acts that establish relations. These acts are often translated as “holy,” though the Navajo language does not have a word for “profane” or “nonholy.”

Characterizing a mountain in his aboriginal homeland as “sacred,” Yoeme elder Felipe Molina was asked if certain mountains were “not sacred.” He replied thoughtfully that elder Yoeme people would say all mountains are important, that none were profane. He added that the word for “sacred” in Yoeme was not sagrado, a Spanish word, but yo’oriwa. When Yoeme collaborators tell me about visiting ancestral worlds, or aniam, in the hills or in caves, they are talking about actual physical places. And if a visitor to these worlds fails the tests therein, the effects are physical in the most real (p. 444) sense, including sickness and death. The Yoeme language provides a non-binary option to characterize such worlds as yo’oriwa, which means “ancient, respected, and/or elder.” “Respected” characterizes aspects of culture as highly valued without implying other aspects as profane and thus not valued. Rather than a dichotomous designation and evaluation of either/or thinking, yo’oriwa denotes importance in a continuum of something or someone’s amount of experience, age, or amount of power.29

These brief Passamaquoddy, Navajo, and Yoeme examples indicate that however respected, vital, and religiously considered, indigenous connections to land have material and physical substance. Many indigenous peoples do not maintain “spiritual” relations with the land if that term, “spiritual,” is in some way defined or constructed as nonphysical or disembodied. Indeed, one can argue that Indians and allies who use the word “spiritual” have been selling the boat to keep the sail. Calling something “spiritual”
or “sacred” to win a land claim in a colonial court of law is an absurd tactic, as the precedent in American courts has tended toward the capitalist, and thereby object-orientated, use and production of land for profit. Additionally, as Colleen McDannell shows quite clearly in *Material Christianity*, Euro-Americans have a long tradition of commodifying, distorting and selling the “sacred.”

Because “spirituality” might work in some general categorical way as a reference to contemporary lives of people, particularly those indigenous and nonindigenous people who subscribe to faith-based religions, we can also see how some people might use it as a point of departure. Missionary efforts in indigenous communities and evangelical movements across reservations have led many Native people to embrace Christianity, Protestant, and of course syncretic worldviews. Indigenous people might describe themselves as “spiritual” and not “religious” to avoid association with institutions, proselytization, or church hierarchies. But because we also can see how the term implies so much more, including some division between one’s material and immaterial existence, we know that the term carries with it the Cartesian notion of a spirit/body divide. We have little evidence that most indigenous people think of the world according to this divide.

### Case Studies of Relatedness

Since indigenous religiosity has long been a focus of anthropologists, an analysis of references to indigenous “spirituality” has a wide and deep pool from which to draw. In encyclopedic fashion, we are best served to look at those texts that either explicitly discuss the use of “spiritual” language or that give evidence of the terms’ clear inapplicability or seeming fit. We first look at those cases when a cultural interpreter uses the phrasing of “spiritual” while simultaneously providing direct evidence that such phrasing is inapplicable. Then we examine a few cases where the authors use “spirituality” without suggesting some of the problematic associations with the binaries discussed above. And throughout these final pages, I posit how “relatedness” might best characterize indigenous worldviews and religious identities since it does not contradict the same works cited here.

Greg Sarris’s *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* remains a favorite biographical study of his Kashiya Pomo elder and teacher, a famous basket weaver and healer in her community in northern California. Sarris uses “spirit” throughout his book as an enabling power, at times a person, and at times a medicine. Spirit, in this perception of the Pomo worldview, can act on the world and empower humans. At various times, the reader gets the sense that the spirit is all-knowing. But at other times, for example when Mabel
McKay chooses not to follow the advice of the spirit, we get the sense that spirit is neither omnipotent nor a qualitatively more powerful entity. If this case is illustrative of other examples across the globe, then “spirituality” might make sense in certain cases, for example among the Pomo.

The use of spiritual language furthers cultural misunderstanding and appropriation, consequences that suggest a preference for another type of terminology. Additionally, we must consider how in the same text, Sarris’s stories demonstrate a Pomo intersubjectivity that belies his own use of “spiritual.” His biographical focus, Mabel McKay, sings songs that lift fog. She has a song that brings snakes to her wherever she may be. He tells us that the medicine baskets want to catch the sickness in the bodies of her patients, that they are hungry for those illnesses. How are we to understand fog that listens, snakes that relate to human voice, and baskets that are hungry? He relates the story of a man who flies down from the sky and asks Mabel to join him in his carriage. Later we learn that this powerful man was mistaken and came for the wrong lady. Power here seems available via powerful, but not all-knowing, beings, including power-wielding humans, snakes, feathers, birds, and baskets. Hierarchical framing of those relations, particularly within the dichotomy of natural/supernatural, obscures important examples of how indigenous people negotiate power among human and other-than-human persons.

In George P. Horse Capture’s book *The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge*, we can get a sense of how power circulates among the White Clay People (Atsina) of present-day Montana in the United States. Relating historical and family stories from the mid-1880s, this slim but powerful text highlights the sacrifices and successes of Bull Lodge, one of the best-remembered and most respected healers from the Plains. From a surface reading, power seems to flow downward along a hierarchy of powerful beings. For example, Bull Lodge asks for healing powers from “Father above man.” At another point, we are told that Bull Lodge held “his hands up in supplication to the Supreme Being.” The descriptions of Bull Lodge’s actions rely upon a hierarchy of power. And his actions do seem to work since he becomes one of the caregivers of Chief Feather Pipe, a pipe with agency, will, and intention.

This view, while plausible, must be measured by an analysis of the process by which Bull Lodge’s stories were recovered. Fred Gone, a reservation worker for the Works Progress Administration, interviewed Bull Lodge’s daughter, Garter Snake, who admits in the preface to have forgotten details. George Horse Capture then edited the transcripts into the book’s published form. Bull Lodge’s tribe had early relations with Jesuits. Garter Snake writes in the introduction of *The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge* that she was raised a Catholic, “being born after the majority of our tribal customs and beliefs disappeared” (18). She kneels down and makes the sign of the cross after relaying her story, as did Horse Capture after receiving her story. She admits at the end of the book.
that she stopped caring for the Feathered Pipe after she joined the Catholic Church. Garter Snake and others may also have been influenced by the expectations of listeners. What religious terms did she believe would be understood by the dominant society? What categories would any audience be able to relate to and conceptualize?

“Intersubjective” more precisely describes this community’s religious actions, a key intention of the editor and teller of Horse Capture’s story. They wanted to show how an individual could amass such great amounts of power due only to his service to his community. The use of “spiritual” highlights the individual quest for ability. And other parts of the book suggest a way of relating more akin to “intersubjectivity,” such as his conversations with persons of the “grandfather” category who live in the mountains and sometimes do not understand Bull Lodge’s actions. These power persons might have to ask their wives for advice. At certain moments in his life, he decides not to follow the directions of the other-than-human persons who give him abilities to heal. They do not punish him, but rather respect his will. These are clearly not all-knowing, all-powerful forces from on high, who set mandates upon humans who are without agency.

Further emphasizing the “relatedness” of indigenous life at this time and in this particular community, among his people, thunder could communicate with humans in understandable ways. The Feathered Pipe chooses his family. The Pipe’s family addresses him, the Pipe, directly and feeds him food. The Pipe feels jealousy. Bull Lodge has an actual kinship with the Chief Feather Pipe. Family members of the Pipe address him respectively as son, uncle, grandfather, or father. The Pipe has a physical body and his leaving causes sorrow. And Bull Lodge’s persistent gifts and sacrifices demonstrate his recognition that he must primarily acknowledge other-than-human powers and establish a reciprocal relationship with them. His actions seem not to be those of a worshipper, but at times a child asking or begging his relatives for help. At other times, he performs rituals and establishes lines of communication with powerful others in a manner that suggests he knows what the outcomes will be more than the other-than-human persons do. “Intersubjective,” like “related,” emphasizes mutual connectivity, shared responsibility, and interdependent well-being.

Lee Irwin’s examination of the Plains ethnographic record revealed that other-than-humans and humans share types of power, even though they may differ in their respective quantities of power. Irwin found that power was demarcated by such abilities as metamorphosis, healing, and controlling inanimate objects. Both humans and other-than-human persons had these abilities, though some had more power than others. This sharing of power, with differences in quantity or application, leads us to the same conclusion as the White Clay/Bull Lodge example above, and as in Hallowell’s findings. Such a leveling, as opposed to a hierarchy, requires reciprocal relations in order to share power across human and other-than-human realms as context necessitates.
reciprocity can be accentuated by the word “intersubjectivity” in order to highlight that subjecthood extends beyond humans. As colloquial shorthand, “related” and “relations” work better than “spiritual” and “spirits.”

The gap between the ethnographic data and the representations of that data suggests, if not demands, we tilt our expectations away from expecting a vertical hierarchy of powerful beings and toward a vision of a horizontal plane of multidimensionality, inhabited by “persons” of the human, animal, and invisible types. Once this shift in perspective is accomplished, we not only view indigenous religiosity more accurately, but we can gain a firmer grasp of the effects of acculturation, conversion, and colonization on indigenous lifeways. For example, in a nonhierarchical multidimensionality, humans begin to have more agency than within the vertical Great Chain of Being. We see this when Yoeme elders bless their own food rather than asking for blessings. We see this when we watch the Yoeme masked pahko’ola dancers blessing the ceremonial grounds before their dances. We see this when Mescalero Apache gan dancers draw the rain from the clouds, rather than placate some deity for rain. We see this when we hear the Navajo medicine man sing about how the humans, who were created by winds, later created gods to help negotiate the relationships between the world of humans and the world of what we might now call meteorology. Indigenous healers and medicine people have long known that humans do not always need to rely on mediators to access power (the way we might think of a priest or church).

The Yoeme of southwest United States and northern Mexico, an indigenous community that voluntarily engaged Jesuit missionaries in the European contact zone, provide a particularly useful insight into how native practices can sometimes combine both hierarchical and horizontal power relations. Throughout this community, the group’s hierarchical ideas regarding religiosity are traceable to an adopted Catholic worldview. In this Yoeme case as well, the seeking of individual grace or salvation involves languages and rituals that are Christian. At the same time, the aboriginal words and rituals persist and consistently accentuate a religiosity that is not solely individualistic, hierarchical, fantastical, or immaterial. In the more aboriginal Yoeme practices, the process of acquiring power to perform in collective ceremonies involved direct relations with the land, plants, and animals. In the less culturally mixed pueblos, adults talk openly and without shame about such ways.

In the more urban Yoeme communities, tribal leaders are reluctant to discuss the pre-Christian aspects of Yoeme identity and history. The reasons why some people might want to hide or ignore the non-Christian aspects of their own cultural activities suggest an active desire to appear acculturated to the point of assimilation. People may also feel resistant or embarrassed about feeling that they have lost perspectives important to collective and individual identity. But also, based on the imperialist nostalgia described
above, they might also wish to avoid further consumption of those practices that are regularly misunderstood by outsiders.\textsuperscript{35}

One of the most descriptive and geographically comprehensive books demonstrating intersubjectivity also relies heavily on a concept of the spirit, since it covers the vast issue of reincarnation among indigenous peoples. Focusing on North America and the Inuit case studies, Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin’s edited book \textit{Amerindian Rebirth} brings together both the survey and the concentrated approaches to ethnographic understanding.\textsuperscript{36} Broadly, the text addresses over one hundred tribes’ worldviews. The book also provides over a dozen in-depth ethnographic studies of reincarnation. In contrast to using “spiritual” to posit hierarchical relations or obscure intersubjectivity, chapter by chapter we see how in many tribal communities, reincarnation was perceived to be shared between animals and humans, and in some cases with other-than-human persons such as geographic features. Throughout, we see that many tribes did come to understand how the English word “spirit,” might best describe those sometimes invisible and sometimes immaterial entities that are categorically “people.” Some chapters, particularly Michael Harkin’s, present us with a view of reincarnation that highlights the social, rather than individualistic, understanding of reincarnation among the Heiltsuk. Harkin does the difficult but important work of showing that many Heiltsuks understand a person’s subjecthood as socially ordered, or dividuated. As in other sections of the book, the reader encounters spirituality in the sense of an animating essence of being independent of a physical form, but not one that necessarily proceeds hierarchically nor individualistically.\textsuperscript{37}

Taking the study of “spirits” and “souls” to the most detailed extreme, Daniel Merkur explores the relationship between these two concepts among the Inuit in his book \textit{Powers Which We Do Not Know}. Working through the sociolinguistics of many Inuit communities, Merkur determines that many Inuit peoples utilize as many as seven different words to accentuate various types or aspects of spirit, the essence of being. Merkur’s work further provides a historical evaluation of which concepts might have predated others. Able to point to a lack of monotheism or perhaps even theism, Merkur takes his readers backward, further into the language’s past, to the earliest of terms for spirit, \textit{sila}. These \textit{sila} were in the world, in dreams, in eagles, bears, the sea, and dogs. More like natural forces of gravity and magnetism than deities or angels, \textit{sila} animated the planets and motivated the movement of breath, making song possible. But to call \textit{sila} “supreme” or greater than human, or similar to Christianity’s ultimate “Holy Spirit” would not make sense in Inuit terms, according to Merkur. Is the sea greater than the soil? Is wind greater than heat? But over time, Merkur determines, this nonphysical force would be anthropomorphized into a giant. And his designation of changing concepts for the Inuit bears consideration for this chapter since he provides historical depth, a nonstatic view of
indigenous worldviews, and resistance to overlaying Judeo-Christian hierarchy onto Inuit religiosity.

Throughout this chapter, I have played fast and loose with temporal designations consciously and strategically. I have drawn on scholarship from the last three centuries. I have moved our focus across the Americas and northern territories. I have intentionally not paused to ask if my claims about “indigenous worldviews” are about a particular community and/or at a particular time. Doing so links me to the ethnocentric practice of decontextualizing indigenous groups from their particular histories and geographies, a suspicious type of armchair anthropology. I might be perceived as doing exactly what I criticize, lumping together all indigenous experiences that can be called “spiritual.” My strategy, however, has been to fight fire (a Pentecostal representation of the spirit) with fire. If people have remained convinced in their use “spiritual” to define aboriginal people’s religiosity because it seems to be evidenced everywhere over time, then my best means to combat this usage was to show how across time and place, we have reason to doubt that “spiritual” gets to the material, collective, and nondichotomous ways of living in the world often obscured by nonindigenous concepts of spirituality. My intention remains to support further inquiry, if not decolonization, of indigenous peoples’ own senses of religiosity.

But what are we to do? Should we cease using “spiritual” altogether when discussing indigenous religious practices and ways of knowing? In short, yes. Keeping in mind, though, the sheer diversity across the hemisphere of indigenous religiosity, we must admit that sometimes “spiritual” fits the bill. Since those uses of the term might emphasize exactly the hierarchical separation of natural and supernatural that this chapter puts on the periphery, some Native communities might accurately be said to be much closer to what we would see in the colonizer’s religions; Christian Diné, Mormon Pomo, Catholic Yaqui communities come immediately to mind. This chapter does not imply that these communities are less indigenous. Nor do I mean to suggest that communities have not been actively syncretic and flexible in their religious orientations. But anyone wanting to accurately describe or interpret indigenous cultures should heed the uselessness or consequences of talking about “spirituality.” In the very long history of this continent’s habitation, native people were relating socially, across species and life forms, in material ways, and for practical reasons, much longer than they have not been doing so.

Critical analyses of the oral stories and earliest ethnographic accounts continue to reveal that, rather than being “spiritual,” native people were relating. Taking our cue from a pantribal religious ceremonial community that brings together aboriginal ritual and Christianity, we might look to how Native American Church members frequently address the recipients of their gratitude and service as “all my relations.” Less cumbersome than
“intersubjective,” “related” might best replace “spiritual,” since it denies neither possible theisms nor hierarchies. One’s relations are not solely related by blood, or tribal heritage. They are the families chosen and not chosen. They are the humans and other-than-humans sharing and withholding power. They counter solitude with solidarity. They provide meaning and identity beyond the confines of race, tribe, and species. In these ways, being related offers more than any abstract notion of religion or “spirituality” ever could.

**Bibliography**


**Notes:**


(6.) Murphy, *Politics of Spirit*, 64.

(7.) Murphy, *Politics of Spirit*, 33.


(9.) Murphy, *Politics of Spirit*, 33.
(10.) Murphy, Politics of Spirit, 47.

(11.) Kasulis, “Philosophy as Metapraxis,” 189.


(13.) Morrison, Solidarity of Kin, 22–23.

(14.) Morrison, Solidarity of Kin, 23.


(16.) Morrison, Solidarity of Kin, 57.


(18.) Martin, Keepers of the Game, 70


(21.) I am altogether aware of the irony that as a non-Indian, I am writing about how Indians should or should not represent themselves within a colonial context. While an explication of my positionality would prove telling, such a complex story cannot be told without severely affecting the aims of this chapter and volume.


(27.) Brandt, “The Fight for Dzil Nchaa Si An, Mt. Graham.”


(29.) All three examples are from the author’s field notes. While Kenneth Morrison is not a fieldworker in the anthropological sense, his work on the Maine Indian Land Claims suit in the 1970s brought him into contact with Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Maliseet community members.


(32.) Garter Snake, *Seven Visions of Bull Lodge*, 125.

(33.) Garter Snake, *Seven Visions of Bull Lodge*, 121 and 123.


(35.) Though not in an American context, Barry Barclay’s book *Mana Tuturu: Maori Treasures and Intellectual Property Rights* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006) attempts to use “spiritual” strategically, while also recognizing that word’s inability to make sense of the interconnectedness of animate and inanimate “living beings” (87).


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