

## FIELD NOTES

### **Standing on the Sacred: Ceremony, Discourse, and Resistance in the Fight against the Black Snake**

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#### **Introduction: Method and Context**

What follows are a set of preliminary reflections on the intersection of religion, indigeneity, and activism at the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservation in North Dakota, located in the North-central United States. Since April of 2016, Standing Rock has been the site of a massive encampment protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), referred to by activists as ‘the Black Snake’, which would transport oil just north of the tribe’s boundary and under the Missouri River immediately upstream of the reservation. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Council claims that it was not adequately consulted during the permitting process for the pipeline and that consequently, state and federal approval of the project is invalid. Additionally, the tribe and its many allies assert that consequences of leakage would be catastrophic for drinking water in the area, and that pipeline construction will damage sacred places and possibly also burial sites. They have led a federal suit (pending) to stop the project and have sought administrative relief from a number of agencies at the state and federal levels. As described below, a temporary victory came on 4 December 2016, when the Army Corps of Engineers refused to validate a permit for drilling under the Missouri River, which is under its jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond strictly legal and administrative forums, the tribe and various protestor groups at the camps (who prefer to be called ‘protectors’) have worked to foster awareness of their struggle, maintaining a vibrant internet presence and soliciting input and support from entities such as the United Nations and Amnesty International. Widely known by its social media handle, #NoDAPL, the protest movement against the pipeline gained local traction immediately, touching a bundle of raw nerves at the intersection of tribal sovereignty, environmental protection, and resource exploitation. Local attention translated quickly into a national and international indigenous peoples protest event. In addition to cultivating social media exposure, the explosive growth of the movement was enabled by non-mainstream media channels and by means of protectors self-

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<sup>1</sup> For a good summary of legal issues surrounding the pipeline, see Shogren 2016.

consciously drawing upon the sedimented stratum of indigenous enviro-activism, such as that highlighted by the Idle No More campaign and the anti-Keystone XL protest.<sup>2</sup> As with these recent predecessor movements, #NoDAPL is notable for its coalitions, especially with regard to trans-indigenous groups, between indigenous and environmental groups, and with social justice-oriented movements, such as Black Lives Matter, which has had a regular and strong presence at the camps.<sup>3</sup> The movement is notable for the way religion is foregrounded in defense of the environment, which is why we are eager to share our preliminary insights with readers of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*.<sup>4</sup>

At the outset, a methodological note is in order. We do not claim to represent the totality of the Standing Rock phenomenon. Indeed, it is so multi-aspectual that we think nobody at this point can adequately engage it in a comprehensive fashion.<sup>5</sup> That said, local voices and those of people who have been immersed in the experience at great length surely have powerful insights that go well beyond what we can offer. Our particular niche is that we are scholars of indigenous religions currently involved in a multi-sited study of global indigeneity.<sup>6</sup> Thus, our angle of vision with reference to Standing Rock is comparative and focused by means of categories that serve to frame the overall project: translation, performance, media, and sovereignty. In addition, we are keenly interested in comparative studies of indigenous protest movements, particularly encampment-based ones such as Sami protests against a hydroelectric project at Alta, Norway, in the late 1970s and early 1980s and contemporary struggles of Hawaiians on Mauna Kea against telescope development.<sup>7</sup>

Pragmatically speaking, our approach has been fourfold: (1) visits to the camps; (2) sustained engagement with activists in the camps over text messages, Facebook, and email; (3) discussions with students and colleagues who have also visited the camps; and (4) analyzing media and social media reports from and about the movement. We have been to the camps twice as of December

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<sup>2</sup> For a representative example of non-mainstream media coverage of the protests, see Sammon 2016.

<sup>3</sup> While such coalitions may appear ‘natural’ in this setting, ample counter-examples can be found, even in recent history. Take, for example, the severe and highly public lines of difference that emerged with regard to the Makah Tribe’s decision to revitalize its whaling tradition in the 1990s. See, *inter alia*, Sullivan 2000.

<sup>4</sup> For reporting on the intersection of environmental concerns and indigenous religion, see, for example, Jenkins 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Excellent resources for understanding the movement are emerging rapidly. See, for example, the ‘#StandingRockSyllabus’ from the NYC Stands with Standing Rock Collective (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks [INREL]. Online: [https://en.uit.no/forskning/forskningsgrupper/gruppe?p\\_document\\_id=383890](https://en.uit.no/forskning/forskningsgrupper/gruppe?p_document_id=383890).

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the Alta dam controversy, see, for example, <http://sapmi.uit.no/>

[sapmi/ExhibitionContainer.do?type=tema](http://sapmi.uit.no/ExhibitionContainer.do?type=tema), and Minde 2005. For analyses of religion-related issues in the context of the Mauna Kea dispute, see Brown 2016 and Johnson (forthcoming).

2016 (Kraft and Johnson in late September to early October; Johnson again in mid-November). Additionally, we had several contacts in the camps before arriving who were invaluable in terms of getting us oriented, emplaced, and connected. These same contacts and others we made in the camps have subsequently kept us abreast of ongoing developments that have been crucial for our ability to contextualize media and social media reports that emerge from and about the camps on a nearly continuous basis. We also have had numerous colleagues and students visit the camps, so triangulating their experiences and perceptions with ours has helped focus our questions and analysis. In addition, we have both made a point of introducing the topic in our respective classrooms and in public outreach, thereby challenging ourselves and receiving feedback along the way. On the basis of this method and our results so far, we have begun to write up and present our tentative findings about Standing Rock. We are grateful for the space here to begin sketching additional religion- and environment-related observations that we plan to develop more systematically and in greater depth in the near future.

As we write this (mid-December 2016), matters at Standing Rock are comparatively quiet. The Army Corps of Engineers' recent denial of the pipeline permit has been an occasion for widespread celebration, and rightfully so. The momentous decision was announced just as matters on the ground were escalating in danger and intensity with the arrival of winter and increased confrontations between protectors and police. Defusing this tension was, it would seem, a matter of life and death. And the Corps' decision to require a full environmental impact statement (EIS) review and potential rerouting of the pipeline vindicated the movement at many levels, underscoring the power of solidarities and coalitions formed in the camps and through various support networks. Even so, the victory is being regarded cautiously for obvious reasons, not least of which is the Army Corps' previous track record on consultation and the looming imminence of Donald Trump's presidency. In this uncertain context, and with winter hitting hard, the camps are a bit frozen in place. Many have left, partly due to the appearance of victory, partly as a result of Standing Rock chairman David Archambault's request for non-Lakota campers to leave (putatively for liability reasons), and surely in part because people are taking a needed break for the holidays. But the camps are not gone. Indeed, this moment is evincing some interesting shifts in people, tactics, and tone, which is part of what we hope to suggest below, especially insofar as these changes entail utterances and actions in the register of religion.

Our aim here is first to present an English translation of our initial impressions from Standing Rock.<sup>8</sup> We then build upon religion-focused themes by turning to a handful of recent issues and examples that we find revealing and instructive, including the increased visibility of ceremony-related discourse in 'actions' (protest events); the emergence and visibility of water-related ceremonies at the camps; recent emphasis in the camps on gender-based ritual roles and constraints; the visibility of divestment tactics, especially as led by Norwegian banks as a result

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<sup>8</sup> For the original Norwegian version and images, see: [https://www.nrk.no/sapmi/kronikk\\_-de-kjemper-mot-\\_den-sorter-slangen\\_-1.13186296](https://www.nrk.no/sapmi/kronikk_-de-kjemper-mot-_den-sorter-slangen_-1.13186296). This contribution to the JSRNC is adapted and expanded from this earlier source.

of pressure brought by Sami activists; rituals and discourses surrounding renaming of the central camp and its re in the wake of the Army Corps' decision; and, finally, discourses about ceremonial authenticity as an index of activist rectitude and authority on the occasion of the departure of the Red Warrior Camp from Standing Rock.

## **First Impressions**

Weary from a long roadtrip, we arrived at the camps on Wednesday 28 September 2016. Our first impression of Oceti Sakowin, the main camp, was overwhelming—hundreds of tipis, tents and replaces, at least 3000 people, and more drums, banners, and indigenous flags than we have ever seen gathered in one place. We later estimated that there were approximately 300 flags; they were arranged in long rows that symbolically and literally frame the protest and the people involved in it.

Five days later, we were still overwhelmed, hopefully somewhat wiser, and convinced that this was a very significant campaign—maybe even one that in important ways would be later understood as historically decisive. The flags alone speak to the size and extent of the event. There have been many references to Standing Rock as the largest indigenous gathering for more than a century. We believe, however, that it must be the largest of its kind ever. Some campers had been here since the previous April. Native Hawaiian sovereignty activist Mykay arrived later, in early September, and he brought with him experience from a yet ongoing protest on Hawai'i related to a planned telescope on Mauna Kea, which many Hawaiians consider sacred. He was, like many of the Standing Rock protesters, gearing up for a long and cold winter. We are 'protectors, not protestors', he corrected us during one of our conversations. He meant protectors of this particular piece of land and protectors of Mother Earth.

The protectors have come from all over the world. This is 'indigenous people united', a young Sami woman claimed the night we arrived. She did so from the Sacred Fire stage, on which a continuous stream of newcomers present themselves and are welcomed. They stand behind the demand to stop the Black Snake, and are concerned with solidarity, environmentalism, and indigenous rights more generally. There is a consciousness of this being historic: the beginning of a global movement based on environmentalism and rights. It reminds author Kraft of the Alta dam dispute in northern Norway where Sami protests in the 1970s and 1980s against a planned hydro-electric plant resulted in a massive police action, but also in lasting gains for Sami communities. As at Alta, people at Standing Rock are gathered around a common cause. They live together, learn from and about each other, develop new networks and communities, and may thus, over time—as in the wake of the Alta uprising and Mauna Kea—grow stronger, regardless of whether the pipeline is built. Whether that will happen is still an open question. The consultation issue is currently being considered. A next round may involve sacred places (for which legislation is relatively weak in the US) and protection of burial sites (for which the legislation is stronger).

Aside from sheer historical momentum, the religious dimension is the most striking aspect of the movement at Standing Rock, as expressed through the protests, the camp, and daily life. Posters at the main entrance signal this dimension. The ground rules and action principles, articulated on posters around the camps, refer to prayer, ceremonies, and the sacred: ‘Water is sacred’, ‘We are peaceful and prayerful’, ‘This is a ceremony, act accordingly’. The same goes for more or less all we heard in speeches and presentations, and for slogans and banners during actions. Videos uploaded to Youtube from direct actions on 4 and 5 October, for example, showed protesters praying for and in front of police and workers from the pipeline company. The Red Warrior Camp opens the commentary to its video from October 5 with ‘Action-caravan on its way to pray at the active work fields here met by armored cars and personnel’.

So what does it mean—that this is prayer, that water is sacred, and that there is so much talk along these lines? On a general level, religious language is an integral part of indigenous gatherings in the United States. People expect references to religion and the sacred and are used to participating in ceremonies and prayer. This, at the same time, exemplifies what we in our ongoing research project refer to as a ‘globalizing indigenous discourse’ related to religious ways of speaking of identity and being in local contexts, and even more in international contexts during encounters with other indigenous peoples. Such encounters presuppose a shared language, along with translation or upscaling of the local dialect. Religion is suitable for—perhaps uniquely capable of—this discursive move, and in different ways. Partly, there is already an established and fairly standardized indigenous religious vocabulary, including harmony with nature, healing and holism, antiquity and spirituality, as well as shamanism and animism. In addition, phenomena like prayer and ceremony are recognizable as such. The local languages used in prayers at Standing Rock are incomprehensible to many among the audience, but they recognize the form: that this is a prayer and accordingly that it demands deference and respect. Moreover, collectively assenting to religious forms in this manner quite directly produces solidarity at the highest possible register. Solidarity thus established can then be translated back to action, whether, for example, working together to chop wood or confronting the Morton County police.

‘The sacred’ contributes to a particular framing of the greater-than-merely-human aspects of the struggle. That ‘water is sacred’ means, among other things, that it is off the table for negotiations—in this case that the demand to stop the Black Snake is non-negotiable. Such language marks this concern as urgently important, as deeply rooted in maximal values and identity claims, as lifted above the level of politics and opinion-making, and indeed as a matter fundamental to all existence. Typical of religious language at Standing Rock is a switching between the local and the global, here and now, past and present. The protesters are fighting for a concrete, delimited case, and they are also fighting for Mother Earth and the future of humanity. The small and the big are thus intertwined, while the future is anchored in traditions from the past. Some of the speeches referred in mythological terms to these things. Oral prophetic traditions reportedly tell of an encounter between the South American condor and the North American eagle. This, according to some of the speakers, is now taking place: a meeting of the world’s indigenous peoples to defeat the Black Snake. During our September visit, this prophecy was announced in several contexts we observed, including during a performance by a visiting

Aztec dance troupe from Minneapolis, and in a manner quite resonant with modes of prophecy with long histories in Native American societies.<sup>9</sup> We observed that the prophetic utterance gained immediate traction in the camps and in social media. By the time author Johnson returned in November, it was among the most common tropes of the movement.

### **Recent Observations and Lasting Marks**

Two and a half months after penning our initial impressions of religion at Standing Rock, we continue to be struck by the persistence of religious discourse and action on the ground and in various media. Indeed, religious tropes can be said to govern expression in the camps and interpretations of the movement. We remain persuaded that religion performs a number of key functions in this double context of performance and mediation—for example, in micro- and macro-order projects of authorization; boundary marking; distinction drawing vis-à-vis acts represented as profane or otherwise bereft of spiritual vitality; and enabling and nurturing fragile bonds of solidarity in the name of the highest possible register—sacred life. For these formal reasons, among others, religion is a ready discourse for projects of public shaming, for making claims to moral high ground, for legitimating and constraining bodily practices in the name of tradition, and for providing channels for intra-community navigation of and contestations over precious claims to space and voice. Here we offer nutshell examples of some of these dynamics as they have unfolded at Standing Rock since October. Actions as Ceremony

The pervasive language of ceremony at Standing Rock is articulated on at least four interrelated scales: (1) specific ritual instances (e.g., a prayer or an offering), which are highly visible in the camps, are enacted nearly non-stop, and form the metonymic substratum upon which the other scales of ceremonial discourse rely for their rhetoric force; (2) the Sacred Fire, where photography is restricted, and protocols for interaction are stated and observed, even while this contact zone also entails moments that are clearly casual and non-ritual; (3) camp life in general, which is observed as ceremony with special emphasis on behavior (no alcohol or weapons), as well as mental and emotional focus; and (4) the protest actions (e.g., processions to the pipeline site or local banks). In each of these frames, ‘ceremony’ functions as a shorthand script to participants and observers alike. This ceremonial frame insists on the ways such contexts shall be defined by purity of intention and action, and is therefore legitimate in ways that eclipse other forms of authority (e.g., law enforcement), and as such demands deference from insiders and outsiders alike.

During our September–October visit, discourses of ceremony were highly visible. This became all the more the case in November, especially with regard to specific acts of protest, which were orchestrated as ceremony. On Saturday, November 12, for example, one of us (Johnson) attended

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<sup>9</sup> On Native American prophetic traditions, see, for example, Geertz 1994 and Nabokov 1991.

an action with his son, Hayden Robinson, and a colleague specializing in Native American studies. The action was implemented by means of a caravan to a DAPL baseyard in Bismarck, North Dakota, where a march took place on the public road adjacent to the facilities. This event was emphatically and repeatedly described as ceremony by its coordinators.

First, the group met in the morning at Oceti Sakowin for a briefing. All participants were immediately told this was a ceremony and were to comport themselves accordingly for the duration of the action, including on the drive back. Elaborating, a leader said that anyone who was feeling angry or frustrated should stay in the camp. We ‘would go in ceremony’ and act in peace. Furthermore, we were told to not wear masks—‘go as your own self; there is nothing to hide in ceremony’. Interestingly, we were instructed to take pictures and disseminate them. ‘The elders have been consulted’, we were told, and they have lifted the ban on pictures for these ceremonies. ‘They want the world to see us in prayer’. Through the day—and even when violence seemed immanent (at one point a truck drove into the crowd and the driver red gunshots into the air)—the language and action of ceremony prevailed. Among the clearest forms of this was the repeated use of call-and-response chants—for example, a leader called out, ‘What do we hold sacred?’ ‘Mother Earth!’ the protectors responded. ‘What is the source of life?’ ‘Water is life!’ However tactical such discourse may be, it is not thereby merely operating at a surface level for media consumption and for rallying purposes; at least, this was our impression from that day and from subsequent reports we have gleaned from others involved in other actions. Whatever else may be happening in such moments, it is clear to us that core convictions are being marshalled, articulated, cultivated, and enacted in ways that both draw upon the power of the past and refashion tradition in the present, including to encompass new members—non-native allies, for example—within novel social configurations.<sup>10</sup> As with all boundary formations forged in moments of liminal contexts, the abiding question here has to do with how new social configurations will be sustained over time and outside the moments of *communitas* that were their condition of possibility.<sup>11</sup>

## **Water Ceremonies**

Most of those who have heard about Standing Rock know, at least, the movement’s slogans, such as *Mni Wiconi*, *Water is Life!* And *Water is Sacred!* In September, this discourse was already omnipresent. It struck us as odd, then, that ritual forms had not evidently followed from and with this discourse. At that time we witnessed no rituals directly focused upon or engaged with water. This seemed particularly odd since rituals are so communicatively dense and amenable to

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<sup>10</sup> For an interesting comparative example addressing Lakota social borders and ritual, see Lincoln 1994.

<sup>11</sup> For a classic and still useful discussion of ritual liminality and *communitas*, see Turner 1969.

mediatization in a way that would seem to benefit the cause. We note that it is likely and even probable that water ceremonies of various kinds had been conducted in private or at least in backstage ways. Our attention here is focused on what happens when rituals move from the domain of privacy—even secrecy—to full visibility, whether by intention or otherwise.<sup>12</sup>

We should note that in late summer of 2016 some Northwest Coast nations arrived at the camps by traditional canoes, making a media splash. Their mode of transport, their regalia, and the stylized welcome all certainly would count as water rituals in a broad sense. But we had seen or heard of little else along these lines before or during our initial stay. On his return trip, however, Johnson observed a shift in this regard with respect to two examples. First, he participated in a Water March organized by the Oceti Sakowin Youth Council. The march was at night, departed from the Sacred Fire and proceeded to a contested island along the Cannonball River, which is said to contain burials and is close to the pipeline drill site. Marchers were instructed to walk in the dark and in silence to the river. Once there, candles were lit and opening prayers commenced, followed by numerous songs. It was a simple but moving ritual that foregrounded the role of water in the struggle. Most of all, the river itself was explicitly addressed as an entity and agent; it was thanked for providing life and told it would be protected. The second ritual author Johnson witnessed appeared to be a daily observance (at least it happened over the four days he was there). Participated in primarily if not exclusively by women, this morning ritual took place at the water's edge of Oceti Sakowin. Bedecked in shawls and lined up on a pier extending from a prominent camp, the women sang and prayed at the water each day shortly after sunrise. It is an agenda of ours to learn more about this ceremony—of its inspiration, roots, and reach. Here we merely wish to point to its presence and basic message: sacred water being ministered to on the banks of the Cannonball River.

### **Skirts and Rituals**

Gender issues were also tied to themes of ceremony and comportment. In September we saw and heard little along gender lines that struck us as unexpected or ritually marked in any particular way. To be sure, men seemed to control events at the Sacred Fire, although women still gured importantly in all observable arenas and were clearly regarded with high esteem as leaders of the movement, as in the case of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, who launched the cause with her creation of Sacred Stone Camp.

The one instance of anything specifically gendered was a report from one of author Johnson's graduate students that she had been involved in a women's meeting during which traditional roles were discussed, including with regard to menstruation and the prospect of establishing 'moon

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<sup>12</sup> On indigenous performativity, see Graham and Penny 2014; on ritualization as/and protest in political and legal contexts, see Feldman 1991 and Tobey 2016.

tipis' for women on their period. This discourse is found also on some of the camps' websites. For example, here is an excerpt from the Sacred Stone Camp's 'cultural' page: 'If you are a woman, you are asked not to attend ceremony, including sweat lodges, while you are on your moon (menstruating)'.<sup>13</sup> Among Native American societies, these proscriptions have widespread precedent, although reasons for such segregation were historically and culturally diverse, as were degrees of correspondence between stated proscriptions and social practice. In some contexts, menstruation was declared to be a form of pollution that could hinder everything from ritual purity to hunting. In other contexts, menstruation was framed as a kind of special power that women were to cultivate through segregation. In still other contexts, the proscription appears in more quotidian terms as a means for women to have time away from men.<sup>14</sup> In contemporary times such proscriptions still obtain in some communities, especially with regard to highly charged ritual contexts such as Navajo Sandpainting, Lakota Sun Dances, and pan-tribal peyote ceremonies. Extension of the proscription to broadly and metaphorically defined ritual settings (e.g., camp life as ritual) is not common in the experience of either author. Similar observations hold for the role of ritual dresses historically and in the present.

By November, gender- and sex-related issues were more prevalent than they had been a month before. Women in full-length skirts were a common sight, in fact more common than not. When asked, two non-native women reported that the elders had announced that all women should be in dresses since the camps are in ceremony. Author Johnson observed non-native women with bags of skirts walking around offering them to women in pants, repeating the claim of the elders' wishes. He also observed that more non-native women than native women wore such skirts. Questions about the status and function of putatively traditional religious demands jump to mind in such settings, as do historical questions about when, and for whom, such strictures are relevant. More research is needed here to say anything further along these lines, and in particular, about the history of church missionization, concomitant dress codes, and the mapping of these onto Lakota ritual habitus.

We recognize that this line of analysis might not be relevant to or appropriate for the purpose of understanding the movement's significance overall. And perhaps it is indelicate for non-native scholars to broach observations of this sort. Even so, we maintain that gender structuring calls for attention from scholars of religion, at least as long as we purport to study religion in a more-or-less evenhanded manner, no matter where we find it. It is well established that even the most honorable causes and traditions are not exempt from human tendencies to deploy claims to sacred status in ways that create highly differential spaces and experiences.

### **From Joik to Divestment**

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<sup>13</sup> Online: <http://sacredstonecamp.org/faq/>.

<sup>14</sup> For a now classic discussion of these issues in a comparative framework, see Buckley and Gottlieb 1988.

One of our first experiences at Standing Rock was seeing three Sami performers at the Sacred Fire of Oceti Sakowin. It was a small-world experience for author Kraft, who lives in a region with strong Sami representation and heritage. The women were heartily welcomed around the fire and their joik (traditional way of singing) and drumming was met with applause. Clearly, they had successfully translated indigenous identity from a Scandinavian context to North Dakota. What we did not know at the time was that these same women would help in the Sami-wide effort to prod Norwegian banks to divest from DAPL, an effort that was eminently successful and which added considerable momentum to the divestment prong of the protest (Bonogofsky 2016).

The success of the Sami divestment strategy also underscores the overall international visibility of the NoDAPL movement, particularly through indigenous media and media networks, even while US mainstream media continued to avoid coverage of all but the most intense clashes with protectors. In Norwegian Sápmi (the Sami region), for example, not only was the movement already well known by the summer, but by fall it was being covered extensively. Moreover, Norwegians from Bergen to Tromsø were engaging in their own protests and ritual performances of solidarity with Standing Rock. In Tromsø, for example, water rituals were being performed before those described above at Standing Rock. On 17 September, a Sami shaman couple conducted a ritual at the beach of Telegrafbukta, the woman dancing to the sound of the male shaman's drumming and joiking. None of the approximately 50 people gathered accepted the invitation to join them in the near freezing water. The ritual was preceded by short speeches by leaders of Natur og Ungdom, a local environmentalist organization. Their presence marked an unusual collaboration between Sami shamans and environmental organizations, as religious discourse and action are far less frequently invoked in Sami environment-related struggles than is the case in North America. This modest ritual, along with Sami joiks at Standing Rock, may be indicative of a subtle shift in the ways some Sami are engaging environmental issues, tapping into modes of religious expression manifestly effective in other indigenous contexts.

Here we wish to underscore the unusual nature of the international awareness of the Standing Rock campaign that transpired, not only because it is manifestly illustrative of global media flows and the heartening uptake of shared concerns at the intersection of indigenous rights and environmental protection, but also because we see this movement as paradigmatic of event forums (to coin a phrase) whereby indigenous peoples translate themselves to indigenous others. As we argued above, this happens at the Sacred Fire on a daily, face-to-face basis; it is also happening on a global scale through the communication channels of the media elite and media consumption by middle-class indigenous citizens, whose primary identity is always local (e.g., Hawaiian or Sami), but whose identity frame increasingly includes 'indigenous' as a general and relational class of belonging. Put simply, focus upon common causes is producing new modalities of indigenous self-awareness, including cross-cultural critiques of settler states by externally situated indigenous others.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Our analysis here is inspired by recent work within indigenous studies on comparative sovereignty and self-determination. See, for example, Simpson (2014), and Goodyear-Ka'pua, Hussey, and Kahunawaika'ala Wright

To give but one example, we received the news of the Army Corps' decision while in Kolkata, India. We were en route to Nagaland as part of an INREL field project. One facet of the visit was for author Kraft to give a lecture at the Kohima Institute on indigenous knowledge production, with Standing Rock as her case. Now she had the added joy of sharing the announcement news. But, as it turned out, the savvy audience was well aware of Standing Rock and the salient issues, and they already knew that the permit had been rejected. Indeed, they were prepared with questions about the specifics of American Indian policy and were quite direct in leveling critiques of the relatively soft form of self-determination experienced by US tribes, their own self-determination being far more concrete at the level of resource control and management. We shall continue tracking issues along the lines of those revealed to us through this telling exchange in order to chart the religious implications of the rhizomatic spread of indigenous solidarity that has manifested so remarkably in this moment of struggle.

## **Oceti Oyate**

What's in a name? This question is usually easiest to answer by way of contrast—for example, when a name is changed. Who changed it? Why? And with what results?

Just after the Army Corps of Engineers' announcement, the politics of emplacement and naming began to unfold in the main camp, Oceti Sakowin. This camp began as an overflow area for the original camp, Sacred Stone. By late summer, however, it was the veritable nerve center of the protest. Not only home to the Sacred Fire, it also became the centralized site for most services in the camp, including the law tent, the medical tent, the various environmental-alliance tents, and so forth. As the camp grew, it became the home of the Pine Ridge camp and other Lakota groups and was thus christened as Oceti Sakowin, camp of the Seven Council Fires of the Sioux. During our time there in September and October, we heard multiple references to the importance of the Sioux camps coming together, united by one fire and under the shared guidance of their collective elders.

Upon announcement of the Army Corps' decision, this turf shifted. In the account of Chase Iron Eyes, a Standing Rock tribal member who ran unsuccessfully for Congress earlier in the fall, the elders of Oceti Sakowin made a decision to extinguish the camp fire and disband the camp, the temporary victory having been won.<sup>16</sup> Standing Rock Chairman Archambault also chimed in, saying the tribe wished for all non-locals to leave the camp for the time being. But these pronouncements failed to take stock of the investments of the youth, it would seem. Many young Lakota men and women had moved to Oceti Sakowin, had made the cause their own, and were calling the place home. They approached the elders about renaming the camp and igniting a new

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<sup>16</sup> For an interview with Iron Eyes about these events, see Sims 2016.

sacred re in order to keep the movement going through the interstitial period. Evidently, the elders agreed and instructed Iron Eyes and others on how to do so according to proper ritual protocol. Led by women in the camp, on 11 December 2016, a new re was lit. The name of the camp is now Oceti Oyate—The Peoples’ Camp. The time for ‘pageantry’ is over, said Iron Eyes. In his words, the camp is the heart of an international spiritual movement, but it is also a survival camp during a dif cult time, by which he meant the dead of winter, and also a liminal period of waiting to see what next would unfold with regard to the pipeline.

## **The Warriors Leave**

At the same time during which Oceti Sakowin became Oceti Oyate, another name change took place in the camp, or at least on the way out of the camp. The Red Warrior Camp—the most militant wing of the movement—broke down its camp within Oceti Sakowin and moved on to other battle sites with a new, broader mission, which is reflected in their new appellation: Red Warrior Society. In the course of doing so, on December 11 they issued a manifesto that levelled strong language against those critical of their militant tactics.<sup>17</sup> The manifesto declared that ‘the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe is heavily engaged in praying away a pipeline without action, this is in direct opposition to who we are as Warriors’. Following this rhetorical line, the manifesto continued thus: The peace policing that was led by people who were for the most part self appointed used ceremony and spirituality as a weapon against us, they too have made it abundantly clear by their actions and their constant slinging of arrows that they are not ready to embrace a world view that upholds decolonization and revolution.

Rather than reifying the distinction between ceremony as ineffectual, on the one hand, and direct action as substantial, on the other, the Red Warrior Society instead reclaimed the domain of the spiritual for themselves. Describing themselves as protectors of true spirituality, they further asserted, Society members are unapologetically Indigenous, we embody resistance, everything we do from eating rubber bullets for breakfast to holding our frontline has been done in a manner that is nothing but spiritual. We have great respect and love for prayer and ceremony and understand its place in a time of battle, many of our People are spiritual leaders in their own right and in their own territories. We are the answered prayers of our Ancestors embodied in the flesh, we are given a sacred duty to ensure the continuity of our Peoples way of life on this planet, and to protect the future for those spirits yet to come.

While not taking sides with or against the Red Warrior Society’s state-ment or position, we find it instructive with regard to the political capacities of religious language for marking internal as well as external differences and value positions.

In the days following publication of the manifesto, other tensions between and within the camps

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<sup>17</sup> See online: <https://www.facebook.com/RedWarriorCamp/posts/1790409241211028:0>.

and with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe became visible. On 23 December 2016, Indian Country Media Network reported on this issue, quoting Chairman Archambault:

‘What I’m seeing now is that people are starting to point fingers and they’re saying that I’m helping Dakota Access, and I find that crazy’, he continued. ‘And the only reason people are saying that is, myself and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe are encouraging people to get out of harm’s way’.

Later on, he noted his suspicions outright. ‘I’ll say it’, he stated, pointing at the camera. ‘The only reason people are trying to stay is because there’s donations. There is money. And if that’s our motive to stay here, we’re no better than that pipeline company. If that’s your reason to be here, you’re no better than the oil company.’ ‘I think people are saying things right now to get what they want’, Archambault continued. ‘All this camp is doing right now is creating friction and accusing—accusing SRST, who’s been hosting, accommodating and meeting needs’. (Luger 2016)

As we noted above with regard to ritual and the construction of social borders, relationships and identities forged in moments of radical liminality face a universal challenge to maintain fragile bonds as the demands of everyday life and quotidian social forces impinge once again. This observation extends to the camps and movement. Life in the camps and the protests writ large have been described and engaged as ceremony, and this has been remarkably effective at many levels, both internally—consolidating values and framing actions—and externally, through providing observers an interpretive lens that *prima facie* foregrounds the movement as sacred and therefore as one that stands above and beyond the profane elements of everyday life. But as with more narrowly construed ritual forms, here too looms the question of sustaining momentum, definition, and purpose in the face of corrosive and entropic forces, even of the most mundane variety. However, as with so many rituals, the key here is likely to be found in repetition. A paradigmatic protest-as-ritual frame has been set at Standing Rock, and surely (if sadly), the need for such movements as/and ceremonies at the intersection of indigenous sovereignty and environmental protection will not abate anytime soon.

Our field notes end here, so we close with the final lines of Red Warrior Society’s manifesto as our coda:

Mother Earth is hurtin and she’s calling for backup.  
Warriors rise up. FIGHT BACK! In The Spirit of Resistance,  
Red Warrior Society

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