

## Chapter 3

### U.N.-Discourses on Indigenous Religion

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It is essential to know and understand the deeply spiritual special relationship between indigenous peoples and their land as basic to their existence as such, and to all their beliefs, customs, traditions and culture. [...] The entire relationship between the spiritual life of indigenous peoples and Mother Earth, and their land has a great many deep-seated implications.

Cobo 1986, Ch. xxi, 26

#### Introduction

Several scholars have commented on the ‘spiritual tone’ of U.N. discourses on indigenous peoples, but mostly in passing and never – to my knowledge – as a main focus. An attempt to address this gap and discuss in more detail U.N. discourses on indigenous religion, this chapter is concerned with references to religion and cognates, and with extent, patterns and usage. Anything resembling a complete account is ruled out by the size of the material, but digital availability allows for a survey of targeted concepts in central publications, substantial enough for an analysis of the main (spiritual) concerns: how is the term ‘indigenous religion’ used at this top-level of global governance? Are ‘indigenous people’ spoken of in religious terms, and – if so – to what extent, in which contexts and for which reasons?

I will start with a brief discussion of methods and material, followed by a tentative overview of the religious wording in three prominent texts: the *Martinez Cobo study* (launched in 1972 and completed in 1986); the ILO Convention 169 (1989); and The United Nations’ *Declaration on Human Rights for Indigenous Peoples* (2007). In the second part of the chapter, I will dig deeper, on more delimited grounds, using as my point of departure *State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples*, a report issued by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2009, as part of their awareness-raising and agenda-setting programmes. Although not a discourse analysis in the strictest sense of the term, I will draw selectively on tools and perspectives from Norman Fairclough (2003) and others, most explicitly in regard to notions of *vocabularies* and *interpretative repertoires*; connected words or word-clusters that constitute both frames and resources for thinking and talking about indigenous peoples.

#### Method and Material

‘U.N. publications’, in this context, means texts published by the U.N., in print or on their webpages, that focus on indigenous peoples. Such publications date back to the formation of the *Working Group on Indigenous Populations* (WGIP), in 1982, and has since then resulted in a massive quantity of documents, across a broad variety of genres: speeches, legal documents, recommendations, proceedings, reports, abstracts, and news clippings. English is the *lingua franca* at this level of indigenous discourse, but many publications – particularly the legal ones – have been translated and incorporated into state legislation, around the world. Most of them can be downloaded from U.N. websites and many are represented on indigenous websites. They are thus in principle available to anyone with access to the internet, and bits and pieces are today widely cited and circulated.

We are here dealing with the top level of global networks, and the highest level of global governance. U.N. legislation, in particular, offers important resources for Indigenous peoples *vis a vis* state governments. Legal documents like the ILO Convention 169 and *The Human Rights Declaration* exist above the messy level of debates and negotiations, as factual and normative (soft law) statements; statements of *what is* and *what shall be*. They are for these same reasons obvious candidates for what discourse analysts entitle *canonical texts* or *monuments*; texts that stand out, that are frequently cited, and that contribute in important ways to the normalisation and naturalisation of claims and vocabularies.

*The Martinez Cobo study* is another likely candidate for status as canonical. Initiated upon the request of the Economic and Social Council in the U.N. in 1971, *The Cobo study* was finally released in 1986, under the name of the Special Rapporteur appointed to prepare it. It is commonly regarded as a milestone in the work of the international movement of indigenous peoples, was followed by important initiatives, is still widely cited, and has no doubt influenced later developments.<sup>1</sup> Of particular importance for my concerns are repeated references to ‘a spiritual relationship to the land’ as crucial to indigenous peoples. This same cluster is repeated in ilo-Convention 169, and the un *Declaration on Indigenous People’s Human Rights*:

governments shall respect the special importance for the cultures and spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> The volume is available on the internet (in the form of scanned pdfs of each of the chapters, which does not allow for a digital search), and consists of three parts, 21 chapters, over a total of 1393 pages (introductory comments and appendices not included). Part 1 (Chapters 1–3) covers various actions taken by the U.N., Special agencies and so on. Part 2 is thematically organised with chapters on how to define indigenous populations, health, housing, language, land, religion and so on. Conclusions and recommendations of the study, in Addendum 4, are available as a United Nations sales publication (U.N. Sales No. E.86.XIV.3).

values of the peoples concerned of their relationship with the lands or territories, or both as applicable, which they occupy or otherwise use, and in particular the collective aspects of this relationship.

*ILO Convention 169*, Part two, article 13

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources.

*U.N. Declaration On Indigenous People's Human Rights*, article 25

Precisely what to make of 'the spiritual' in these texts is a fairly open question. My point so far is that 'the spiritual' is regularly used in documents whose authority, legitimacy and visibility are today unrivalled on the level of international indigenous politics. A second point, to be developed further in the pages to come, is that the more elaborate style of documents like *The Cobo study*, and *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* add frames, details and content to these abstract, legal phrases, but in ways that keep options open regarding the religion-secular binary.

A third point of interest has to do with the comparativism employed in this first, and so far most extensive and ambitious, U.N. study of indigenous populations, particularly examples of up-scaled comparativism. The *Cobo study* consists primarily of brief accounts of particular groups in their state contexts, organised thematically, and together revealing both diversity and similarities. However, in between these highly factual accounts are passages depicting a common core, formulated in ways that imply or indicate 'ultimate concerns'. Religious language tends, in this study, – as I will argue in regard to *State of the World's Indigenous People* – to be used primarily at the highest, more overarching, level of indigeneity and identity-claims.

*State of the World's Indigenous People* was issued by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples in 2009,<sup>2</sup> as part of its four part strategy of awareness raising, information collection, co-ordination of activities, and advisory function.<sup>3</sup> It is listed on the (front) website of the Forum,

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<sup>2</sup> The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was established in 2000, and today constitutes a highly important combination of think tank, debate forum and meeting place for indigenous representatives from around the world. More than 1500 indigenous representatives attend the annual sessions in New York, along with representatives from some seventy countries and around thirty-five U.N. agencies and inter-governmental entities.

<sup>3</sup> The volume is presented under 'acknowledgements' as a collaborative effort in which a number of experts and organisations participated, among them authors of the thematic chapters (which are described), the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum (responsible for writing the introduction), an overall leader of the process, a managing director, an editor, a long list of named commentators, and input from two three-day long expert group meetings organised by the Russian Association of the Indigenous Peoples in the North and the Yamal Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

together with the ILO Convention, the *Human Right's Declaration*, a film, and various official U.N.- reports. The document is 238 pages, and is structured by the main topics of the Forum's mandate: Economic and Social Development, Culture, Environment, Education, Health and Human Rights.

The stated goal – to describe and discuss the state of more than 370 million people in some ninety countries – is approached through a combination of general references and examples from distinct indigenous peoples. There is not, unlike for *The Cobo study*, a particular chapter devoted to religion. Chapter ii (Culture) offers what is the overall most extensive and elaborate usage of religious concepts, but there are also substantial clusters in Chapters iii and v, on 'Environment' and 'Health' respectively, and occasional references in the rest of the chapters.

### **State of the World's Indigenous Peoples – Tone, Terms and Vocabulary**

Having read through *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations 2009), and based on previous references to an indigenous religion 'tone' and vocabulary, I started with a digital search. Basically, I (1) counted instances of particular words, (2) categorised them according to the topics they are connected to, and (3) distinguished between instances that refer to indigenous people in the singular (what they *collectively* are, have or need) and the plural (what *a particular* indigenous people has, is or needs). In addition to words that I expected to be there (spirituality, indigenous spirituality, sacred, religion, holistic, Mother Earth, shaman), I included a selection that are in scholarly settings commonly applied to indigenous religions (animism, more than human, healer, spirits), along with certain classical religious terms (god, goddess, sacrifice, salvation, holy, myth, goddess, priest, evil, ritual, ceremonies). Finally, I included a range of concepts relating to time, origins and history (ancient, immemorial, ancestors, ancestral, future, traditional, nature, environment, environmental).

Although too small to qualify as representative or exhaustive, my collation of the words used, does indicate linguistic preferences, and can accordingly serve as a starting point for a mapping and analysis of patterns and regularities. Absences, first, indicate that recent scholarly inventions (or reinventions) have not been incorporated into U.N. discourses, or at least not in this particular study. There are no references to 'animism' and 'more than human', and few to 'spirit' and 'healer'. Classical religious terms, similarly, are rare and far between. Indigenous peoples are not talked of in terms of salvation, sacrifice, sanctity/ sanctify myth, holy/holiness, priest, evil, goddess, god, ritual. Nor are there references to the vocabularies of the specific religions to which major parts of them belong, such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

As for the words represented, the most striking tendency is the dominance of 'spirituality' and

‘spiritual’ (45 and 97), and the far more limited usage of ‘religion’ (7) and ‘religious’ (12). There are in addition four references to ‘Indigenous spirituality’ (all of them singular), twelve to ‘sacred’, and five to ‘holistic’. The remaining cognates tend to cluster around time (*origins*) and space (*lands*), including concepts such as immemorial (3), ancestral (25), ancestors (8), ancient (4) and – the overall winner – ‘traditional’ (363). ‘Immemorial’ is in all three instances a part of the mythically toned phrase ‘since time immemorial’, used in relation to indigenous practices and traditions. ‘Ancestors’ and ‘ancestral’ refer to either specific places where ancestors are buried and/or to ongoing relationships to ancestors at these sites, for instance through “dreams and spiritual paths” (United Nations 2009: 62). ‘Sacred’, similarly, is used primarily in connection to sites, with a few instances including ceremonies, traditions or objects.

References to ‘space’ top the list of my word-search, with two hundred and forty-five references to environment, one hundred and nine to environmental, and fifty-three to nature. ‘Mother Earth’ is found in one passage only, under the sub-title ‘Violence against indigenous religion’, and in the form of a citation from the *International Indigenous Women’s Forum*:

Indigenous traditions and indigenous women themselves identify women with the Earth and therefore perceive degradation of the Earth as a form of violence against women. This conviction is more than a metaphorical allusion to Mother Earth. It is rooted in indigenous cultural and economic practices in which women both embody and protect the health and well-being of the ecosystems in which they live.

2006: 172

The relative lack of references to Mother Earth surprised me, due to the prominence of this concept in U.N. discourses more generally. Mother Earth is used in other publications listed on the website of the Permanent Forum, including *The Cobo study*; the General Secretary has used it in speeches addressing indigenous issues, and a ‘Mother Earth-day’ has been established.

It is possible that Bolivia’s granting of subject-status and legal rights to Mother Earth have compromised ‘her’ position on this level of global discourse. A 2010-report by the Permanent Forum entitled *Study of the need to recognize and respect the rights of Mother Earth* (Permanent Forum 2010) refers to “misunderstood prejudice views” that Mother Earth is a *religious* creed, “the promotion of which would impinge upon freedoms such as the freedom of conscience” (2010: 8). Similar concerns may lie behind another significant absence; that of the shaman. Although well established as an idiom of indigeneity, and widely used in indigenous communities, the ‘shaman’ may be ‘too religious’ on this level of discourse. The shaman is in addition controversial amongst some indigenous people, whether because of the harsh critique of New Age appropriation of the term, of scholarly critique of the concept, or simply because some

indigenous people consider themselves secular, belong to a different religion, or do not think of their pre-colonial history in terms of ‘shamanism’.<sup>4</sup>

## Religion and Spirituality

‘Religion’ is consistently excluded from ‘indigeneity’, as articulated in both *The Cobo study* and *State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples*. The latter uses ‘religion’ exclusively (and as such sparsely) with reference to either particular religions among distinct indigenous peoples, or – more commonly – to hostile intruders from outside. “Indigenous spirituality,” to cite one instance of this usage, “has in many cases been violently repressed or forbidden and are under constant assault from the large, dominant religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.” (United Nations 2009: 60).<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 2 (on culture) provides a definition of religion and spirituality respectively. “Religion” is defined as “a specific practice and ritual that are the external expression of some people’s spirituality,” and “an institution with a recognised body of communicants who gather together regularly for worship and accept a set of doctrines offering some means of relating the individual to what is taken to be the ultimate nature of reality” (United Nations 2009: 60). “Spirituality” is defined as “an internal connection to the universe, which includes a sense of meaning or purpose in life, a cosmology or way of explaining one’s personal universe and personal moral code” (United Nations 2009: 60). The contrast acknowledges affinities (why else would spirituality and religion be contrasted?), yet insists on the “important difference between them” (United Nations 2009: 60), and in ways that emphasise the dichotomy between ‘external’ (religion) and ‘internal’ (spirituality).

The usages of ‘spirituality’ on the same page, the rest of the chapter, and indeed in other parts of the publication, shift between more or less religious and more or less secular versions.

‘Spirituality’ comes in primarily secular versions, as with the reference to values and worldview in the above definition, or – on the opposite end – as ‘religious’ in most established senses of the

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<sup>4</sup> Among the Norwegian Sámi, for instance, most of whom identify as either Christians or as secular, ‘shamanism’ is the established term for speaking of the religious past, and is today a central and highly visible part of nation building, but primarily framed as ‘cultural heritage’. A vibrant neo-shamanistic milieu has existed since the mid-1990s side by side with usage of the shaman and shamanism in nation building contexts, but many Sámi are critical of this form of ‘religious’ shamanism, and would protest strongly to being identified as such.

<sup>5</sup> *The Cobo study* takes a slightly different approach, arguing that it is a problem in certain state-contexts that official definitions of religion exclude traditional indigenous practices, and thus deprive them of the legal protection and benefits granted to the category.

term, as for instance in this passage:

Spirituality is the relationship human beings create with the spirit world in order to manage forces that seem overpowering. Indigenous spirituality is intimately linked to the environment in which the people live. For indigenous peoples, the land is the core of all spirituality and this relationship to the spirit of the earth is central to all the issues that are important to indigenous peoples today.

*Indigenous Peoples 2009: 59*

We here have links between ‘spirituality’ and ‘the spirit world’, combined with references to ‘the spirit of the earth’, all of which are presented as ultimate concerns and as integral to indigeneity. Spirituality is used primarily in connection to the land, traditions and health, and it often emerges as a non-differentiated aspect of indigenous people’s being and identity, but – again – usually in elusive ways, avoiding clear cut boundaries between the religious and the secular. We may, in the language of discourse analysis, speak of a *floating signifier*, a term whose meaning (signified) is vague and unsettled, and that can accordingly mean different things to different people and in different contexts.

We are not, at the same time, dealing with something free floating. This, for instance, differs sharply from the seeker-mentality typical of spirituality discourses in New Age and neo-pagan circles, centred on the self-development of individuals. Indigenous spirituality is a collective concern, centred on indigeneity as such: on ancient traditions, ancestral lands and the inner being of indigenous people – what *we are* and *have*, or what *we have partly lost* and must now *reclaim*.

Contrasting this with ‘western’ culture and religion adds a further level of meaning and resonance. Indigenous spirituality shares ground with New Age spiritualities in regard to a notion of ‘religion’ as formal, dogmatic and church-like institutions, prone to abuse their power. ‘Religion’, moreover, tends to be categorised as ‘western’. Although usually implicit, both *The Cobo study* and *State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples* occasionally spell out this logic:

Indigenous peoples have rich and diverse cultures based on a profound relationship with their land and natural resources. Dichotomies such as nature vs. culture do not exist in indigenous societies. Indigenous peoples do not see themselves as outside the realm of nature, but as part of nature [...]. Nor do indigenous peoples emphasize a radical duality between the sacred and the mundane as happens in Western culture. In many indigenous cultures, social and political institutions are part of the cosmic order, and it is on the basis of their worldview, beliefs, values and customs that indigenous peoples define their customary laws and norms.

United Nations 2009: 52

The ‘other’ of identity-claims must somehow be connected to scale. For this reason, perhaps, ‘indigeneity’ tends to imply – or, as in this passage – be explicitly opposed to ‘western’ people and traditions. Usage of the West as *other*, moreover, is likely to trigger older primitivist discourses, in this passage including the relationship to nature (close *contra* distant), notions of worldviews (holistic *contra* dualistic), and of religion (undifferentiated *contra* differentiated). *The Cobo study* adds to these a distinction between private (western) and communal (indigenous) notions of ownership over the land (Cobo 1986: Ch. xvii, 30–31), but is otherwise more ambivalent in regard to the relationship between ‘religion’ and the western-indigenous divide. In practice, however, its focus is exclusively on the indigeneous side of the divide. The chapter on religion notes that “indigenous beliefs, religions and churches would seem to have practically disappeared in some areas,” adding that “this seems to be the case in several countries, for which there is information” (Cobo 1986: Ch. xix, 16). It is nevertheless exclusively these same traditions that are depicted in the study, usually with unclear or missing references to time. There is hardly any mention of the ‘dominant religions’ to which many, if not most, indigenous people according to their own measures belong.

Identity claims in local settings may make use of the global scale, wholesale or to some extent, and for any numbers of reasons, but are as likely to adjust, adapt or ignore these identities. The Norwegian Sámi, for instance, are in their local and national context both Norwegian and Sámi, and are in their every-day lives unlikely to perceive non-Sámi Norwegians as ‘western’, or to talk of their relationship in terms of this particular chain of oppositions. Sámi neo-shamanism, however, regularly draws upon this discourse; Sámi artists and musicians sometimes do; international contact zones are likely to make use of it (festivals, tourisms, U.N.-meetings and so on), and the national media regularly cite and structure their representations on the basis of it.

## **Conclusion**

A *náhppi* is a milk bowl, traditionally an important utensil in Sámi reindeer husbandry, that lately has been taken up and exhibited by Sámi artists (*duodji* specialists). The philosopher Nils Oskal, in a study of its potential meanings – in the present and in the past – notes that the object today exists “in a state of tension where it says something to everyone, where it says something to a selected few, and where it no longer says anything to anyone” (Oskal 2014: 89).

What I have referred to as an ‘indigenous vocabulary’ lacks concrete objects like the milk bowl. We are here dealing with ‘big’ and highly abstract words, but words, nevertheless, that like the milk bowl can be expected to say different things, depending on the prior knowledge and



experiences of any audience, and the scale of usage. Unlike the milk bowl, moreover, this vocabulary consists of words that are native to none of the early traditions of the indigenous people who use them. ‘Indigenous spirituality’ depends upon a fairly recent concept of indigeneity, born in the wake of the international movement of indigenous people. The adoption of ‘the sacred’ (from Christian and scholarly vocabularies) probably dates back to Australia in the 1970s, when the concept of ‘sacred sites’ entered legal discourse, through the combined efforts of anthropologists and aboriginals (Tsing 2009:55). ‘Mother Earth’ has linguistic relatives among numerous religions, but is framed by environmentalist concerns and images, including the Gaia-model developed by James Lovelock (Rønnow 2003; Gill 1987). Remaining parts of the ‘vocabulary’ (spiritual, ancestral, immemorial, holistic and so on) all have wide fields of usage, only parts of which are ordinarily understood as religious, but most of which lend themselves to religious or mythical interpretations.

It is tempting to describe this vocabulary as a *second order abstraction*, existing above the level of (native) first order concepts, and used to interpret and organise them in particular ways. Worlds like ‘sacred’ and ‘Mother Earth’ offer translational and bridging devices, calling upon people to search in their native vocabularies for matching words; of what their version of sacred places or Mother Earth may be. Distinct indigenous traditions and religions are thus made comparable in ways that support notions of common ground and shared denominators, thus facilitating the double vision of indigeneity as uniqueness and unity. This vocabulary must – in order to work and survive – be useful both on the intra-discourse level and in regard to the outside world. It needs, more specifically, to come forth as respectful of, and appropriate for, in principle all indigenous peoples, and simultaneously offer signs and sound-bites for external communication.

Both levels have to do with the diplomatic dimension of indigenous discourse. Institutions like The Permanent Forum of Indigenous Peoples constitute diplomatic (or para-diplomatic) arenas and activities. They facilitate communication between delegates from different indigenous peoples, and between indigenous peoples and their outside world, whether inside the U.N. system, *vis a vis* nation states, or on variously scaled public fields. For this they, as other diplomatic institutions, need a common set of rules and language (Hauge and Neumann 2011), along with simple messages; ‘sound-bites’ that are clear and striking enough to break through the noise of late modern publics, and that are in addition recognisably ‘indigenous’.

‘Spirituality’ scores high on several of these criteria. It lacks obvious enemies, and carries the intuitive ring of primitivist traditions, thus offering recognisable signs and soundbites without being explicitly or necessarily bound by them or these images. It is in addition elusive enough to pass as secular, but can draw upon the respect, depth and sincerity connected to religion. Religion and religion-like language, more generally, offer qualities and potential that are useful, if not

indispensable for identity-making at this level of abstraction. Religion, to quote Bruce Lincoln's famous thesis on method, "is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal" (Lincoln 1999:395). Sacred claims add depth, sincerity and ultimacy, thus helping to lift words above the level of the ordinary and position them beyond dispute and argument. These particular sacred claims draw extensively on environmentalist discourses, and thus on what is perhaps the most commonly acknowledged field of global urgency. They refer mainly to this-worldly issues and challenges; to the identity of indigenous people (in the singular and the plural), and to matters concerning rights and sovereignty (particularly in regard to land). What I refer to in the introduction as 'a spiritual tone' of U.N.-discourses on indigenous people, consist partly of a religious- or religion-like concepts connected to these issues (spiritual, sacred); partly of the ultimate concerns to which they are related, and partly to mythical references to origins ('time immemorial' and others). This, then, is not 'religion' in the sense of faith in supernatural beings, but religion as identity and way of being, a global style version of civil religion and cultural heritage.

The degree to which this globalising discourse results in a standardisation of local cultures is likely to differ, depending – among other things – on specific local ground incentives. What I have referred to as second order abstractions may take on a life of their own, by being incorporated among the first order concepts that they in a previous round of events helped organise. It may also be established as an additional layer of discourse, an additional resource for talking and thinking – in certain contexts, on specific scales, and for specific goals.

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