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## Distinction Between Indigenous and Western Cultural Conceptions of the Earth and its Relation to the Environment

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# Distinction Between Indigenous and Western Cultural Conceptions of the Earth and its Relation to the Environment

## Abstract

The differences between Indigenous and Western cultural conceptions of the Earth is a major cleavage between both communities and a source of tension and misunderstanding. Native American religious beliefs in communal ethics, the belief in the Earth and nature more broadly being a source of spiritual fulfillment and enlightenment, has encouraged Native Americans to work to safeguard the environment they feel a spiritual connection to. This is contrasted in Western notions of human centrality that encourages Western consumer economies to exploit resources for commercial profit that has led to the dispossession of Native lands and desecration of its sacredness in the eyes of Native Americans. This gap in cultural conceptualizations of the environment is important to analyze in order to contextualize Native grievances towards the confiscation and subsequent exploitation of their lands and how differing patterns of land management between both communities reflect the widely diverging cultural concepts each community has for mankind's role in and relationship to the environment.

## Keywords

Communal Ethics, Indigenous Rights, Environmentalism, Environmental Injustice

## Disciplines

Environmental Studies | Indigenous Studies | Other Religion | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## Comments

Written for IDS 206: Native American Studies

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Distinction Between Indigenous and Western Cultural Conceptions of the Earth and its Relation  
to the Environment:

John Zak

Professor Sellers  
IDS 206  
December 11, 2020

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.

The differences between Native American and Western cultural conceptions of the Earth and humanity's relationship to it is important to compare and analyze in order to understand the disconnect between the two cultures and the contextualization of Native American grievances and suffering from the loss of their land. Communal ethics, central to Native American culture, teaches Native Americans to view the Earth as a sacred source of nourishment and enlightenment as well as having religious significance demonstrated in Native American ceremonies that typically involve celebration of nature (Lobo and Morris et. al, 2016). Native Americans therefore have a natural inclination towards environmentalism as they have a spiritual interest in protecting the environment that they hold to be sacred in an interdependent relationship between mankind and nature. This reverence for the Earth and dedication to its protection is contrasted sharply by Western conceptions of humanity and its relationship with Earth. Human centrality replaces communal ethics in Western notions of nature and as a result Colonial peoples view the Earth as a source of consumption and exploitation of resources (United Theological, 2011). The result of this has been the dispossession of Native lands for the purpose of commercial exploitation that has had devastating environmental, spiritual, and economic consequences for Native American communities. It has also created an unsustainable economic system of consumption and exploitation of natural resources that has devastated the environment and accelerated the process of climate change and all of the negative consequences this phenomenon entails. This exploitation of resources is motivated by Western concepts of the Earth and humanity's relationship towards it that teaches the Earth exists for human consumption. As a result of these differing concepts, a disconnect exists between Colonial peoples and their

governments' understanding of Native American concepts of nature.

Understanding the importance of communal ethics to Native Americans contextualizes their sense of devastation felt at having been dispossessed of their land and forced to watch its resources pillaged for the purpose of commercial profit. Native Americans view land in religious terms as their land is considered spiritually sacred and a source of nourishment to them. This contrasts with secular Western views toward land ownership that historically was meant to represent socio-economic status (Lobo and Morris et. al, 2016). When understanding communal ethics as a central principle of Native Americans, it can be understood the sense of injustice felt by the dispossession of their land. Spiritually sacred land was taken from them without compensation, while its resources have been exploited for commercial profit desecrating such sacred land without any of the profits being shared with impoverished Native American communities.

The example of the Lakota Sioux in the case of the Black Hills region demonstrates this injustice and how Native Americans have been economically disempowered by the confiscation of their sacred lands but also how it severed critical spiritual connections to it. In violation of the 1868 Ft. Laramie Treaty that promised Lakota control of the Black Hills, the discovery of gold and construction of the transcontinental railroad encouraged white settlement and subsequent conflict with the Lakota who sought to defend their land legally guaranteed to them (Huey, 2013). In violation of the treaty, American troops intervened on behalf of the settlers who subsequently confiscated the Black Hills region as part of the United States. This was economically devastating to the Lakota as they relied on the region for its land based economy

but also had spiritual connections there that stretched over centuries. The subsequent exploitation of the Black Hills region for commercial development desecrated the sacred lands of the Black Hills that had such spiritual significance for the Lakota. This underscores the difference of cultural conceptions regarding land ownership and development, as the Lakota used the Black Hills as a source of religious fulfillment and spiritual salvation, while the West used the Black Hills for commercial exploitation that damaged the environment and desecrated land held sacred by the Lakota people (Huey, 2013). This consumption of the Earth's resources for human centrality that the West has valued seen in the Black Hills continues to this day, while the Lakota live in abject poverty and are forced to deal disproportionately with the environmental consequences of the Black Hills pillaging of its resources. The Bear Butte mountain in the region is considered sacred for religious reasons by the Lakota people, although the mountain has turned into a tourist attraction with a hiking trail. This has led to the interruption of sacred religious and cultural ceremonies on the mountain while sacred relics left there by the Lakota over centuries have been desecrated or even stolen by tourists (Huey, 2013). This desecration of the Black Hills and degradation of its environment underscores the differing conceptions of nature and humanity between Western and Native peoples. Consistent with human centrality, the West has exploited the Black Hills resources with its damaging environmental consequences for the purpose of unsustainable consumption. The Lakota people have been left devastated as their sacred connection to this region has been severed and its land desecrated for commercial profit they have not even been able to access to develop their own communities.

Spiritual connections by Native Americans to nature is further evidenced by the use of

ceremonies typically involving nature. The use of cocoa beans by the Kogi people in Colombia is meant to honor Native boys becoming men and is used as a celebration of their upcoming adulthood (Ereira, 2015). In addition to this the Kogi people are also known to appoint leaders to the position of mummies and cabos. These titles are for those tasked with defending the purity of the environment, attesting to the importance of environmentalism for Native Americans as this is considered a prestigious and important position that demonstrates Native spiritual interests in protecting the environment and nature consistent with communal ethics (Ereira, 2015).

The Sioux are also known to hold similar ceremonies for their youth on a sacred hilltop. This holy hilltop is accompanied with the use of objects that underscore Native American spiritual connections to nature. The use of quilts and even a piece of a young boy's grandmother's skin demonstrates spiritual importance of nature and how this holy ceremony in Sioux culture takes place in nature on a sacred hilltop (Lame Deer and Erdoes, 2016). These examples underscore how land is not simply used as a source of economic power, status, and exploitation of resources as is done in Western culture but nature is used as a source of spiritual fulfillment and salvation consistent with the concept of communal ethics. This is because communal ethics teaches Native Americans to extend humanity to all entities whether they be human beings, animals, or even aspects of nature. This is what contextualizes the Native belief in the connection between the spiritual and physical world that encourages Native Americans to advocate for environmentalism, to protect the environment they hold sacred and spiritually connected to (Kimmerer, 2020). This is contrasted again with Western notions of the Earth and the environment that encourages the West to view nature as existing for human consumption and

exploitation, in a human-centric manner versus the interdependent manner which Native Americans view nature.

The spiritual viewpoints of communal ethics that govern Native American concepts about nature and mankind's relationship to it is central to their religious beliefs about the Earth being sacred and a source of fulfillment, nourishment, and enlightenment. It is also historically been a motivating factor for the West of seeking to eradicate Native American culture they perceived as a threat, with Native religion and its association with communal ethics as a central justification for the West to confiscate Native lands and dehumanize them as a people (Newcomb, 2016). The concept of the Doctrine of Discovery is central in Western notions of land ownership and has influenced the belief of human centrality with relation to the environment that has had such negative impacts on the health of the Earth and Native peoples. The Doctrine of Discovery was a edict issued by the Catholic Church in the fifteenth century during the maritime explorations that led to the Iberian powers colonizing the Americas. It stated that land discovered by Christian monarchies in Europe that were controlled by non-Christians were entitled to confiscate and subsequently rule the land (Newcomb, 2016). This policy became central to the European colonial project and attests to the influence of Christianity in the early colonial project in the Americas. Also, how this doctrine dehumanized Native Americans as their non-Christian religious practices, Communal ethics in particular, became synonymous with barbarism and Europeans viewed them as sub-human and thus not worthy of the typical rules of diplomacy and war that governed relations between the Christian monarchies of Europe.

Understanding the importance of the Doctrine of Discovery and role it has played in Western



notions of the environment and management of land is critically important as it explains the concept of human centrality and exploitation of resources. The sense of entitlement amongst the European colonizers, that Christianity was a symbol of being civilized and therefore non-Christians were barbaric and unfit to govern their own land, influenced Western views toward Native American land ownership but also how they managed that land once they confiscated it. The Doctrine of Discovery was even enshrined into U.S. law following the 1823 Supreme Court case Johnson v. McIntosh that greatly weakened Native claims to their lands once confiscated and further weakened Native American legal claims to land they already owned (Newcomb, 2016). This doctrine therefore was apart of U.S. law and attests to its importance in influencing Western attitudes towards both Native Americans but also reflects Western cultural notions of the environment and nature more broadly. Its central premise rests on the idea of human centrality and in this particular case European Christians as members of the “righteous faith” who were entitled to exploit the resources of Native lands for the purpose of consumption and commercial profit. The core goals of the colonization of the Americas reflects this notion of human centrality and natural resource exploitation as the early Spanish conquistadors landed in Mexico, at the time governed by the Indigenous Aztec Empire, for the purpose of discovering gold and spreading Catholicism to a people they saw as barbaric (United Theological, 2011). As a result of this doctrine, the concept of human centrality in Western notions of the environment is further highlighted and how it sharply contrasts with Native notions of the environment that concerns an interdependent relationship between mankind and the environment where mankind must protect nature for spiritual as well as practical reasons. Also, how this notion of human centrality is

related to Christianity in the West and how it has become a central justification for the dispossession of Native lands and endures today in Western consumer economies that promotes human centrality and the idea of the earth existing for human exploitation.

The consumer based economies of the West have also given Native Americans practical reasons to be involved in environmentalism that accompany their spiritual interests in protecting it. The confiscation of Native lands for commercial exploitation has disempowered Native Americans as their economies were land based and thus a major source of their capital. Native Americans have also consistently been disproportionately impacted by the environmental devastation that comes from this exploitation of resources as their communities are typically near their former lands now being exploited (LaDuke, 2016). Native Americans have been exposed to uranium mining disproportionately that has exposed Native communities to radiation, pollution, contamination of water supplies, and health problems. These health problems include respiratory issues, premature births, miscarriages, and cancer that has caused a number of premature deaths (LaDuke, 2016). Other prominent examples of environmental injustice being experienced by Native American communities is the disproportionate proposal of waste dumps next to predominantly Native American towns, threatening to further expose Native communities to pollution and contamination of water supplies. Also the disproportionate disposal of nuclear waste and nuclear testing near Native communities poses serious health consequences from increased exposure to radiation and pollution (LaDuke, 2016). Native Americans therefore have a practical as well as spiritual interest in fighting to protect the environment, as these consumer based economies centered around exploitation and waste have not only desecrated sacred lands

but exposed Native communities disproportionately to devastating environmental consequences.

The example of the Klamath River and water rights in California between colonial and Indigenous Californians attests to such environmental injustice that has impacted Native communities but also reinforced their determination to protect the environment. The Klamath River and its fish population was both a major source of economic livelihood for Natives in this region through the fishing industry but also was considered spiritually sacred by the Native tribes that inhabited the region (Kohler, 2008). During the 1970s a series of discriminatory laws were passed banning Native tribes from fishing in the Klamath due to fishing shortages, despite Natives making up a small percentage of the fishermen operating in the river. This not only had the effect of devastating the economic livelihoods of Natives in the area who depended on the fishing industry for employment but also severed a sacred spiritual connection to the river that these Native tribes had imbibed in for thousands of years (Kohler, 2008). Following Native protests over this discriminatory law and legal victories in the courts, Native fishing rights and access to the Klamath for religious ceremonies were restored. However, a debate between farmers and Native fishermen over water rights once again threatened the Native tribes of the Klamath and underscored how Western notions of human centrality caused both devastating environmental but also economic and spiritual consequences for Native tribes of the region.

Farmers in California sought to open up the Klamath River for irrigation, against the scientific advice of the Department of Interior and against the wishes of Native Americans in the region. This was because lower than average temperatures were expected, meaning diverting water from the Klamath to irrigate farms could have negative environmental and economic

consequences as the Klamath River could fall to dangerously low water levels. This threatened to devastate Native communities in the area economically as the fishing industry would be effected but also cause environmental damage to a river long held sacred by the California Natives of the region (Kohler, 2008). Under political pressure from farmers the administration of George W. Bush sought to attract political support from, the Klamath River was opened to irrigation against the advice of his own Interior Department and the protests of Native American activists. The following effects were devastating as higher than usual temperatures led to dangerously low water levels that killed off much of the fish population in the Klamath. The construction of dams following this also diverted critical water resources away from the Klamath, exacerbating the environmental damage to the river held sacred by Native tribes through their belief in communal ethics. The local economy centered around the fishing industry for Native communities was also devastated as thousands of fish washed up dead on the Klamath's now dangerously shallow shores, wildlife Native Americans also felt a spiritual connection with as part of the river (Kohler, 2008).

The story of the Klamath is important because it not only underscores how Native Americans experience with environmental injustice has reinforced their connection with and eagerness to protect the environment, but is also a great example of the West's notions of human centrality and how it has created exploitation based economies that are environmentally unsustainable in the long run. The motto of "people over fish" preached by the farmers during the public debate over the issue underscores most starkly the sense of human centrality and how it encourages the notion that the environment exists for the exploitation and consumption of resources (Kohler,

2008). This has had spiritual, human, as well as economic costs for Native Americans that is captured by the story of the Klamath as it includes all the aspects of economic, environmental, and spiritual devastation that came with the destruction of the Klamath River and its resources. It also demonstrates how Western society's neglect of spirituality with the case of the environment has caused a sense of rampant materialism as these consumer economies have ravaged the environment and propelled climate change (Lyons, 2015). The differences therefore in Native and Western notions of the environment and mankind's relationship toward it sharply diverge and is a main source of tension between the two groups as the story of the Klamath so clearly captures.

Overall, Native American and Western notions of the environment sharply diverge and is a main source of friction and lack of understanding by Westerners toward Indigenous land claims. This is because the concept of communal ethics promotes a spiritual and sacred connection to land as a source of enlightenment and spiritual fulfillment. It is because of this Native lands confiscated from them cannot be solved by financial settlements. The case of the Lakota rejecting a one-hundred million dollar settlement over the Black Hills dispute highlights this, as the issue is not one that can be solved with money as it cannot buy back spiritual connections severed and desecration of the Black Hills considered sacred by the Lakota (Huey, 2013). Also, how Native Americans are acutely vulnerable to the environmental consequences of unsustainable development and exploitation of resources adds a practical interest in protecting the environment that compliments their spiritual interest in it. This is contrasted sharply with Western notions of human centrality and how since the beginning of colonization of the

Americas through the Doctrine of Discovery human centrality and exploitation of resources were the governing principles of these economies and societies engaging in colonial conquest. Also, how this model exists to this day through the enshrinement of the Doctrine of Discovery into U.S. law and the existence of consumer based economies centered around exploitation and waste that are environmentally unsustainable in the long term. The idea of waste in the fact that these consumer economies dispose of fifty trillion pounds of waste into the environment including garbage, nuclear waste, and carbon emissions demonstrates the sense of human centrality and how it has been so damaging for the environment in the long term (United Theological, 2011). The greatest tragedy of the differing concepts of the environment and nature between Indigenous and Western cultures is that the group most concerned about protecting the environment is not in a strong enough position to do so due to the legacy of disempowerment, discrimination, and systematic exclusion perpetrated against the Americas' Indigenous peoples, while at the same time they are bearing the brunt of this environmental degradation and its spiritual, economic, and human costs.

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