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**The United States as Imperial Peace:
Decolonization and Indigenous Peoples**

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Resisting Imperial Peace

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We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace.

St. Augustine

Este Maskokvlke etohkvlkat, este omvlkan huehketv enhayaket, asēvpayet, enfulletvat etemvhayaket omakvtes. Ofvnkv vkerricakvn hiyetv komakvtes. Momes, horrē hiyetv eskerrakēt fullet omvtes. Etvlvwv cuko rakko svhopyaknomat, hoktvke mon honvntake hēcvtkat, Este Maskokvlke enfulletvt kērraketos. Honvntake paskofv heleswv sēafastet vtotkakofvn, hoktvke hvpō paskofv afullothen hiyakat este estomakē omvlkv, tvleporv omakis, emponiyet, empohatet, hompicaket, omakvtes. Momofvn, horre hiyetv sekātēs.

Dr. Rev. Rosemary McCombs Maxey
(Maskoke Scholar)

Since 9/11, we see an increasing attention to empire, particularly as Bush almost explicitly supported a concept of American empire in the “war on terror.” The war on terror then suggests that peace will be maintained through the United States’ imperial apparatus.

Consequently, many scholars and activists call for an end to this form of “imperial” peace.

However, as legal scholar Sora Han argues, we must develop this analysis further by understanding that the United States is not AT war. The United States IS war.¹ That is, how is the very construction of the United States itself based on the normalized relationship of war with Indigenous Nations within its colonial boundaries that we have then naturalized as “peace?”

This is through the intersections of Christian imperialist and capitalist ideologies that have come to disconnect peoples from the earth to make land as a commodity and to prioritize peoples’ relationships over the earth as if living beings can be ontologically hierarchicalized, placing human existence at the top of the scale, and therefore separating humanity from the earth and its living beings. The fear of interacting too closely with the natural world can be traced to Medieval European Christianity. Kirkpatrick Sales highlights in his biography of Christopher

¹ Sora Han, *Bonds of Representation: Vision, Race and Law in Post-Civil Rights America*. Unpublished dissertation. University of California, Santa Cruz, 2006.

Columbus the Medieval European fear of nature and the natural world, and societies' desire to conquer the beasts of nature, thus "having dominion over fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the face of all the earth," as read in Genesis 1:28. As Sales points out, "What it has meant to be 'civilized' since the time of the Mycenaeans (circa 2000-1100 B.C.E) has entailed the increasing domination and control of the natural world."²

Of course, many scholars such as Deloria, Tinker, Weaver, and others have also made this argument giving recognition to Indigenous Peoples' relationships to the natural environment in the geographic space of a respective Indigenous society where localized epistemologies that are vital to holistic cultural perpetuation, necessarily evolve from communication with the sacred as the sacred is manifested in the elements of the natural world. Many Indigenous societies have primary annual ceremonies which renew 'covenants' with the earth and living beings in their space in order that they may provide an additional four seasons of food sustenance, medicine, and a means of acquiring prophetic knowledge by way of being revealed through communication with the sacred made manifest in animals plants, trees etc. Therefore, the continuation of Indigenous Peoples' lifeways is contingent upon ontologically equal relationships with elements of the natural world. Christianity, including environmental Christianity, will say humans are stewards of the earth. While the environment presumes priority, an ontological separation from humanity remains.

Accordingly, while Liberation Theology, an agent with the capacity to transcend Eurocentric ontological impositions, has sought to eradicate a wide range of oppressions in the

² Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 74-90.

world anywhere from political and economic social justice endeavors to seeking pragmatic grass roots inculturation in liturgy, it remains that the popular ecological paradigm penetrating the discourse, introduced by Eco-theologian Leonardo Boff, is one that emerges from the effects that many outcomes of oppression, such as poverty, have had on the natural environment; In turn, this fails to acknowledge the inherent ethical responsibility Indigenous Peoples have to maintain intimate relationships with the earth as ontological equals, remaining in accord with the earth and subsequently serving as caretakers of the earth through renewal ceremonies, for instance.³ Thus Indigenous Peoples are excluded as intricate parts of the respective theological discourse and forced to participate in a paradigmatic response to repercussions of former imperialist activity enacted by the Western colonizer. Indigenous Peoples who seek a resurgence and/or at the least an affirmation of their autonomy and lifeways cannot settle for a paradigm which promotes their responsibility to remain in accord with the earth simply as a response to oppressions that may have developed outside their own localized context nor impositions by groups who operate outside any given Indigenous societal space where people evolve uniquely and communally in accordance with the sacred; rather they must embrace a model that upholds and recognizes their unique spiritual responsibility to be in appropriate ontological relationship with the earth as it is taught within their respective society. The aforementioned paradigm only leads to cultural dilution- in the sense of taking on new reasons to be in accord with the earth that do not unfold or derive from a traditional and sacred philosophical framework rooted in *spatiality*– the notion popularized by the late scholar Vine Deloria.⁴ For example, those living on an Indian reservation

³ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, (NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁴ Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, Colorado: North American Press, 1994).

where an abundance of trash or other forms of pollution fill the region should continue attempting to care for the earth through renewal ceremonies, environmental protection efforts, daily rituals etcetera which all embody generational teachings; that is to say they are operating on localized spiritual traditions and not superimposed responses to colonial systemic ramifications like poverty.

I want to examine how the introduction of human existence being ontologically separated from the earth impacts Indigenous Peoples, especially those who embrace a form of Christian practice. At a recent board of directors meeting for an Indigenous Catholic organization, I was speaking to my fellow board members about various ethical issues with bottled water, particularly about certain bottling companies perpetrating injustices against living beings around the world. Furthermore, I challenged everyone in the room to remain conscious of the way in which we daily treat and utilize our water, since elders among my Maskoke People have instilled within me the sacredness of water. They teach that water is our first medicine! Ironically, it was an Indigenous priest sitting next to me who stated: “No! Human life is most sacred!” I replied “well, the brain is made up of nearly 85% water...the liver nearly 95%...muscles 70% etc.” I was told in reply: “We are Catholic, that’s it, we’re Catholic” and that I was simply “over-spiritualizing” the matter. As ambiguous as his reply may sound, the message was quite explicit. Even our traditional Indigenous perceptions of the environment are being severely compromised by those intellectuals and religious leaders who I thought operated effectively in both Indigenous and Western worlds yet find it increasingly difficult in modernity and post-modernity to resist the seductively acculturating institutional pressures to which they must answer.

I am also reminded of a popular contemporary Christian band that has won over the ears of persons across the globe, including many Indigenous persons. This group “Casting Crowns” produced a major hit, with a remarkably catchy tune, in 2005 called “While You Were Sleeping” where one section of the song iterates the words: “United States of America—Looks like another silent night, as we’re sung to sleep by philosophies that save the trees and kill the children.”⁵ After discussing this song with some Indigenous persons, they found themselves feeling a need to dichotomize and thus prioritize their pro-life stances into first supporting anti-abortion campaigns before their own inherent Indigenous responsibility to care for the earth, as this seemed to be “true Christian teaching” since this particular mainstream Christian group (notably comprised of all euro-american fundamentalist evangelical Christians) was promoting such a message. It did not take much to cease their pro-life agenda from extending across the board—including non-human living beings—to quickly elevating humanity to a hierarchically superior position over our other living relatives of the earth. How does this naturalization of imperial peace occur such that even Indigenous Peoples have come to internalize the conditions of war enacted against them as natural?

Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard comments that many Peoples talk about decolonization. He notes that in the name of sovereignty, Indigenous Nations have shifted their aspirations from decolonization to recognition from the settler state.⁶ That is, they primarily articulate their political goals in terms of having political, economic or cultural claims

⁵ Casting Crowns, “While You Were Sleeping,” *Peace on Earth* (Reunion Records, 2008).

⁶ Glen Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of ‘Recognition’ in Canada,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2007): 437-460

recognized and/or funded by the settler state within which they reside. The problem with this strategy is that Indigenous Peoples then exist at the whim of the settler state. But perhaps even more importantly for Coulthard, Indigenous Peoples begin to change the way they understand themselves and their Nations. In particular, their idea of Indigenous nationhood radically shifts from that which is fundamentally antagonistic to the interests of patriarchy, empire and capitalist accumulation to what essentially is neo-colonial in nature and compatible with these ideologies. Consequently, while Indigenous peoples will make claims that they have a radical relationship to the land, in comparison to Western society, when in fact they have shifted their relationship to an anthropocentric one in which they now have a capitalist relationship to land in which the needs of people becomes distinct and prioritized over land and the rest of creation. On the premise of Coulthard's argument, I will examine the material of the naturalization of imperial peace within Indigenous Nations.

Federal Recognition and Land

As mentioned previously, Indigenous Peoples redefine their relationship to land within a capitalist formation that supports economic development. In order for an Indigenous Nation to be eligible for federal services provided to entities appearing on the federal register as Indian tribes and who share in a "government-to-government relationship" with the United States, it must be acknowledged by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in U.S. Department of the Interior. An Indigenous Nation that did not appear on the federal register prior to the year 1978, must prove their inherent Indigenous authenticity by undergoing the Federal acknowledgement process

through the Office of Federal Acknowledgement (OFA) in the Office of the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs of the Department of the Interior which implements Part 83 of title 25 of the Code of Federal Regulations (25 CFR Part 83), *Procedures for Establishing that an American Indian Group Exists as an Indian Tribe*. The rubric by which a petitioning group is acknowledged in the eyes of the settler state as “authentic” centers itself around seven criteria, to which a positive final determination for the group seeking federal recognition is contingent upon meeting all seven of those criteria. As described by the OFA, they state:

a) The petitioner has been identified as an American Indian entity on a substantially continuous basis since 1900. **b)** A predominant portion of the petitioning group comprises a distinct community and has existed as a community from historical times until the present. **c)** The petitioner has maintained political influence or authority over its members as an autonomous entity from historical times until the present. **d)** A copy of the group’s present governing document including its membership criteria. In the absence of a written document, the petitioner must provide a statement describing in full its membership criteria and current governing procedures. **e)** The petitioner’s membership consists of individuals who descend from a historical Indian tribe or from historical Indian tribes which combined and functioned as a single autonomous political entity. **f)** The membership of the petitioning group is composed principally of persons who are not members of any acknowledged North American Indian tribe. **g)** Neither the petitioner nor its members are the subject of congressional legislation that has expressly terminated or forbidden the Federal relationship.⁷

The process of meeting these seven criteria begins when the petitioning entity submits a letter of intent to the OFA, making known the group’s desire to undergo the existing process of acquiring federal recognition. The group then submits a petition to which a team of three

⁷ United States. Office of Federal Acknowledgement. Office of the Assistant Secretary—Indian Affairs of the Department of the Interior. Part 83 of title 25 of the Code of Federal Regulations (25 CFR Part 83), *Procedures for Establishing that an American Indian Group Exists as an Indian Tribe*. edition 2008.

persons is assigned to begin evaluating the available evidence in order to make a judgment of whether or not the entity is indeed an “authentic” Indigenous group according to the seven criteria.

This acknowledgement process phenomenon is highly problematic in a number of ways, including it often becoming the focal point of a petitioning entity’s livelihood. The team of three staff persons assigned to the group consists of an: anthropologist, genealogist and historian, none of whom are Indigenous persons (Currently the OFA has only one Indigenous employee out of ten and he serves as the chief of the Office of Federal Acknowledgement) and who never step foot in the community of the petitioning group. As Ann Denson Tucker, chairwoman of the Muscogee Nation of Florida- a group that has been petitioning since 1978 and has yet to receive a final determination for federal acknowledge from the OFA- puts it “Our universe becomes nothing more than 100 years of ten year increments scanned and digitized, sorted four ways and subject to bureaucratic interpretation. For them our world is a paper trail. We will never have enough paper for the current process and we will never have the right paper.”⁸ The identity of a respective Indigenous group gets defined in terms of cultural essentialist characteristics that are crystallized in the past. In turn, Indigenous Peoples then internalize as their authentic identity the etic perspective evaluations of the settler state which only demonstrate immense cultural gaps on part of the OFA. What gets lost then among members of the Indigenous community is a sense of indigeneity that is rooted through practices tied to the land in the space in which that particular

⁸ United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, Oversight hearing on Fixing the Federal Acknowledgement Process. Chairwoman Ann Denson Tucker, Muscogee Nation of Florida. 2009, minute 91.

society lives and operates. Because the conditions of the land and all of creation are ever-changing, so too do prayers and ceremonies adapt. However, what identifies indigeneity is often some notion of cultural purity tied to static beliefs rather than the set of practices and relationships that need to be maintained and thus allows for holistic evolution of the People's lifeways in accordance with the sacred. This leads to all sorts of counterproductive identity politics in which what designates a "real" Indigenous person may not even have anything to do with who is actually maintaining proper relationships with the land, particularly through *communal* renewal ceremonies.

Additionally, as the OFA emphasizes "the burden of proof is on the petitioner." For many Indigenous Nations, overcoming this obstacle has proven to quickly turn the process into one of a capitalist venture. A strong petition for federal recognition requires a thorough compilation of: oral histories, archival documents, genealogies etc. Moreover, petitioning groups must pay researchers and archivists to gather such historical data of the group, scholars who construct narratives of the community, and attorneys to advise arising legal situations. That is in accumulation to continued costs for electric, water, rent and insurance for the building from which the group operates. Since the proliferation of Indian Gaming in 1988, corporate investors have taken major interests in Indigenous Nations petitioning for federal recognition. In several cases they have been the sole funders for groups' petitions and in some instances they have amounted to forty million dollars. In return, Indigenous Nations make prior agreements to erect gaming facilities following the acknowledgement of the entity, thus turning over to the investors

a significant portion of revenue generated by the enterprises for a certain period of time agreed upon by the negotiating parties.

Consequently, also, when the federal government defines who is “Indigenous,” Indigenous Peoples who do not gain recognition then express sentiments such as if we are not getting any economic entitlements, let’s just be white people. Thus essentially then, Indigenous identity itself becomes a commodity that one sells for some sort of economic or political entitlement. If the identity is not marketable enough, then it will simply be dispensed with.

State Compacts

Moving beyond Federal recognition, another example can be seen in the issue of state compacts: In 2004, the 38 federally recognized Indigenous entities within the colonial state of Oklahoma were faced with one of the greatest opportunities, within a contemporary political context, to continue defining the currently ambiguous parameters of exercising Indigenous sovereignty. At the time 27 Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma operated over 80 gaming facilities. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act names three classes of gaming, I and II (traditional Indigenous gambling, Bingo etc.) being acceptable without state compacts, but Class III gaming (i.e., slot machines) requires Indigenous Nations to enter into compacts with the state. Some Nations at the time were at risk of being found in violation of the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act as they were operating electronic forms of bingo in their facilities, placing the operations under Class III gaming. The colonial state of Oklahoma saw the violation of Indigenous Nations gaming operations as a capitalist endeavor of their own. State compact 712,

a 15-year automatically renewable agreement, was drafted, proposed and voted on by Oklahoma citizens, allowing the state to erect three of its own horse racetracks and collect \$71.8 million in gaming revenue which was presented to voters as future educational monies for Oklahoma students. An astounding \$58.5 million of the \$71.8 million is now taken from Indigenous gaming facilities.⁹

On the one hand, gaming is seen as a sovereignty issue. That is, even if we do not agree with gaming, we should recognize that Indigenous Nations have the right to it. But in doing so, we do not ask ourselves, what kind of sovereignty are we gaining through gaming? In particular, we are actually saying we should abide by state governments and waiving sovereign rights. But more importantly, sovereignty again is no longer defined in terms of living in a good way in the world, i.e. conducting annual ceremonies to renew the space around us and caring for the earth, but in terms of capitalist economic development. Once again, identity is a commodity that we will sell for the right to engage in capitalist ventures that tie us in a more invested way with an economic system that takes us farther from the land.

Many fundamentalist evangelical churches and pastors that regularly teach and preach against gambling ironically support gaming facilities because again, it is a way to buy their Christianity and mobilize their evangelization agendas. Upon early encounters with Christianity, many Indigenous Peoples were intrigued by the healing stories of Jesus, which often lead to subsequent individual and communal conversions to Christianity—or perhaps for many cases, it may be better put as Indigenous Peoples merely adopting the narrative accounts relating to the

⁹ See Oklahoma state question legislative referendum 335, voted on by the people of Oklahoma November 2, 2004.

powers of this newly-heard-of medicine person. Moreover, multiple references to elements of the earth in the Hebrew Bible also confirmed, for many, recognizable parallels between the Christian and Indigenous worlds. Among Maskoke People, the healing stories of Jesus narrated in sermons, formal testimonies and casual dialogue typically relate to those where Jesus works with elements of the natural environment (this kind of dialogue mentioned usually emerges in a context where persons are discussing similarities between Christianity and non-Christian Maskoke practices). Among these are the stories of Jesus changing the first medicine (i.e., water) into wine (John 2:1-11) and the story of the blind man where Jesus “spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go wash in the pool of Siloam (John 9:1-7). Notably, the latter story not only involves the mud of the earth to bring about healing to the blind man, but the ritual is completed by washing with the first medicine in the pool of Siloam. Although recognition of Maskoke connections to the earth remains in the church through regularly highlighting these selected biblical passages, today many Indigenous churches gladly accept gifts of vans and modular buildings, for example, donated to them by the governmental entity of their Nation as well as monetary allocations for repairs on church buildings etc.- all being primarily derived from casino revenues. Through this, Christianity too becomes a commodity.

To make matters worse, the excuse for this is that we can somehow now “fund” cultural revitalization. Many Indigenous language revitalization programs now insist that they must have monetary funding to operate effectively. Indigenous governmental officials are quick to allocate monies to these kinds of programs to ensure that the “authentic” Indigenous face does not exit

the scene while they are rapidly scheming new capitalist ventures. Nonetheless, Indigenous Peoples cannot rely on these sources of revenue and the logics of Western economic necessity to dictate the survival of their languages and lifeways. Rather, language revitalization should be initiated for Traditional reasons that remain true to the specific framework of the society that emerged in the space where the group lives and that reflects a grass-roots engagement of the community. Traditional People who embrace a paradigm driven by resistance to capitalist implications found in modernity and globalization discourses must know when to protest the injustices conjured up by our leaders that permeate and infect our community's traditional Maskoke approaches to pedagogy. Once again, culture becomes not based on relationship and practice, but is now a commodity we can ironically buy from our colonizers in exchange for waiving our claims to sovereignty.

At the same time, the reality is that while culture is claiming to be preserved, it explicitly is not. During my time as a counselor for Indigenous youth in a local high school, one of my recently fathered sixteen year old students approached me about seeking direction for his life. He told me of his desires to continue learning Traditional dances, songs, language and furthermore begin engaging in the ceremonial reclamation processes lately emerging in his Nation. While he was not excelling in this Western academic setting, and after speaking with his father, I encouraged him to quit high school and begin studying with elders from his community. The Nation of which he is a member promotes the vision for all of their students to attend college and be "successful," as they have come to define success in terms of economic status. Consequently, my student found himself being looked down upon by many members of his

Nation as well as being confronted by the ethos embodied in the political infrastructure of his Nation. Ironically however, they did not hesitate to slap his “cultural” image on a poster that reflected the authenticity of their indigeneity. In other words, his brown skin phenotype, black hair and notably the Indigenous ceremonial articles held in his hand was chosen to be the image upheld as representative of the socio-cultural and ideological makeup of his Nation. While he was questioning his choice to drop out of school, I reminded him that it was *his* image that could be found on the tokenizing poster of his People and not one of the Western educated persons of his Nation that had never taken the time to learn her or his language and lifeways. A representative of the education department from my student’s Nation proudly rendered one day the vision of their Chief- that is the importance of his People participating in the globalized corporate world while simultaneously maintaining their culture, to which I replied, “Did it ever occur to you that those two efforts may very well be incompatible?” Land is not a commodity and hence does not provide a basis for capitalist accumulation, even when tradeoffs are presented, such as language and cultural revitalization to be made the façade of the Indigenous Nation’s political entity to gain support for such economic development ventures.

Thus, somehow the well-being of Indigenous nations is tied up with their own self-commodification. Supposedly, the issue from which to be liberated is poverty, but in Western discourse- the primary discourse to which many Indigenous leaders subscribe- poverty is only defined in relationship to capitalist accumulations. As Bill Mollison, a permaculture activist has stated, “Though the problems of the world are increasingly complex, the solutions remain

embarrassingly simple.”¹⁰ Indigenous nations, in the midst of fixated ideological goals of capitalism, find it difficult to conceive of implementing methods of subsistence agriculture and other sustainable ways of living that remain in accord with the earth and its living beings.

Indigenous traditions have been changed to become safe for capitalism through Christian imperialism. It is so successful that we do not even see the influence. Navajo scholar Jennifer Denetdale critiques the ways in which Indigenous Peoples manipulate their own agendas by calling anything tradition, such as exploiting natural resources and banning homosexual marriages. Assimilation tactics such as the Indian boarding school era and relocation policies enacted against Indigenous Peoples are unambiguously significant factors in stripping Indigenous persons of knowledge pertaining to their traditions.¹¹ Even many Indigenous persons argue that capitalism is traditional on the premise that Indigenous Peoples have always valued nice things. Indigenous societies have not “traditionally” been profit-driven economies and moreover they fail to acknowledge the junctures of contemporary capitalism and systemic global oppression, as well as the incompatibility of inherent ethical responsibilities to care for the earth and capitalist endeavors that are inevitably tied to the commodification of the earth. From this material basis then, Indigenous culture itself becomes transformed.

¹⁰ Midwest Permaculture, “Redesigning our lives as if caring for the planet matters,” 2010. <http://www.midwestpermaculture.com/index.php>

¹¹ Jennifer Denetdale, “Carving Navajo National Boundaries: Patriotism, Tradition, and the Dine Marriage Act of 2005,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. June (2008).

Vernacularizing Christianity as Cultural Imperialism

Again, Indigenous cosmology is fundamentally a contradiction to capitalism, thus it cannot continue to exist without being an essential challenge, and so it is domesticated through Christianization. It thereby becomes add-ons to Christian capitalism. I will now examine the ways in which my own Maskoke People's Christian theology has come to internalize imperial peace through changing language practices.

I regularly argue that decolonization of the mind, for Indigenous Peoples, begins with language acquisition. Today, discourses around efficacious pedagogical tactics for language revitalization in Indigenous communities are highly controversial ones and moreover, the ethical debates emerging from those discourses over what is the "proper" or purist language of a respective community can find its origins deriving from imperialist activity initiated by Christian missionaries. Missiology has well established some of the key historical differences that led to successes of Protestant and Catholic missions. One of the strategies employed by Protestant missionaries that won them an astounding number of converts was the practice of translating scriptures into the native language of the people they encountered. Yale scholar Lamin Sanneh argues in *Translating the Message* that vernacularizing Christianity was in fact the opposite of colonization because it revitalized the languages of the local population while western imperial rule sought to impose their languages on the subordinate other. He says "missionaries had become indigenizers in the best sense of the term, rather than cultural imperialists. Translation thus brought Christian mission into an original congruence with the vernacular paradigm, with a

tacit repudiation of Western cultures as the universal norm of the gospel.”¹² Although Sanneh highlights the autonomy strengthening factor of vernacularizing Christianity in local contexts, he fails to acknowledge the colonial impacts on Indigenous ideology and epistemology through changing language practices. Post-colonial theorist Ngugi wa Thiongo who has argued for the importance of writing in and mobilizing local languages and concepts says “language carries culture and culture carries the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world.”¹³ On the contrary to Sanneh, I must argue that translating scriptures into the language of the people is indeed altogether cultural imperialism through the practice of predicating Western theological concepts to the words of a society that possess their own inherent locative connotations with imperative implications concerning their own cosmologies. This kind of linguistic chaos has permeated Indigenous societies since the time of initial scriptural translation periods and we find today in sentences with identical diction and syntax, two distinctly different suggestive meanings implied, depending on the context from which they were uttered- Christian and non-Christian (i.e. an Indigenous religious realm). For example, the Maskoke term *naorketv* contemporarily takes on two connotations. Among Maskoke Christians, this term is used to convey the Western theological concept of sin, implying its relationship to one’s eternity with God in heaven and moreover, a Roman Catholic interpretation of its affect on one’s present relationship with God. In the non-Christian colloquial usage rather, it means to

¹² Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2008), 90.

¹³ Ngugi wa Thiongo. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann 1986), 15-16.

bother someone or to bother the entire community, thereby disrupting the ultimate goal of the society; that is, maintaining balance and harmony among the People residing in the community.

Another example is the term *hvlwen tvlofv*. This literally means “the town on high.” The term *tvlofv* is derivative of and still today colloquially corresponds to the word *etv/wv* which connotes a village that possesses the most manifested sacred entity, i.e., the fire, at the heart of the ceremonial space; however the new term introduced by missionaries to describe “heaven” as the town on high, turns the cosmology of Maskoke society upside down by removing the most sacred space of the People from the village, which is connected to the land, and placing it in an intangible and unfathomable dimensional space somewhere up high. Consequently, this disrupts the importance of renewal ceremonies which recalls and reaffirms ontological equality with the earth in the here as a cyclical practice rather than emphasizing an eschatological vision that sits at the end of a Western chronological linear scale of time to which an individual fixates her ultimate goal.

Nearly all songs employed in Maskoke worship services were composed around the time of initial displacement from Maskoke homelands in what are commonly and colonially known today as the states of Alabama, Georgia and Florida. These songs are ones of grief, composed along *este-merrketv nene* (the road of suffering people, i.e., the trail of tears), as encouragement to persevere for survival during the one-year march westward, beginning in the winter, to what became the colonial state of Oklahoma and to which the Maskoke Nation lost one-fourth of its population. Most of these songs include in their final stanza, variations of the phrase *hvlwen tvlofv mvn ete hecakavres* (we will see each other there in the town on high), exemplifying the

notion that life will be better once we leave the earth. Perpetually rendering these songs in regular liturgical settings not only reflects the immense internalized oppression thriving among Maskoke People, but also the lack of interest in continuing renewal ceremonies. I recall a gathering of Maskoke People one year on December 31st, according to the Gregorian calendar, where the majority of youth anticipating the clock to strike 12:01am, began shouting repetitively “Happy New Year.” I heard my aunt sitting next to me mutter under her breath, “*pom ohrolope-mucvset okot os*” (it isn’t our new year), expressing her disappointment in the younger generation as they have forgotten what our *Posketv* renewal ceremonies, which take place in the summer time, are all about.

Furthermore, this gets reinforced in readings of Pauline writings such as in Philippians 3:20: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” The Greek noun *politeuma*, translated as citizenship in this passage, is most often understood in its historical context as a commonwealth or state; and so, Maskoke Peoples have classically interpreted Paul’s sentiments as suggesting we think of our home as being in heaven, a place up high where Jesus reigns, rather than on earth. We must however, look at a more nuanced understanding of the term *politeuma* that may perhaps appeal to the notion that Maskoke People have responsibilities to care for the earth in the space in which they live in the here, and should turn away from eschatological visions as a goal of liberation, for instance. In much Greek literature of Paul’s time, *politeuma* was also used to describe a colony of foreigners, a group of people who have been relocated or displaced. Thus we can interpret *hvlwen tvlofv* as it is understood in Maskoke scriptures, as a space of displacement, where Maskoke People

cannot carry out their inherent ethical responsibility to be caretakers of the earth, and in turn exist absent of purpose and will perish- according to Maskoke prophecy- from failing to conduct renewal ceremonies from which the earth will not provide food sustenance and medicines etc.

Additionally, the term *hvlwen tvlofv* is used interchangeably with *ohmekketv* to reference the word “kingdom.” *Ohmekketv* however, is the place where the *Mekko*, or leader/primary servant of the *etvlwv*, has influence. Once again, the translation has removed the sacred space from the village on earth connected to the land, to a place up high where Jesus presumably becomes the *Mekko*, thus devaluing the position of the *Mekko* of the *etvlwv*. Moreover, when uttered in English as “kingdom,” both concepts *hvlwen tvlofv* and *ohmekketv* are internalized and reified through inherent implications of heteropatriarchy, androcentrism and homophobia, all foreign and contrary concepts to the Traditional Maskoke matriarchal system as well as Traditionally prescribed positions of holy duties performed by queer persons. This too has profound impact on Traditional conceptions of the earth as it is seen as a feminine entity in Maskoke philosophical worldview. We find here another instance where the agent of translation perpetrates cultural imperialism through predicating Western theological concepts to Maskoke language.

Feminist theology has made it widely known that the Greek word *basileia*, usually translated “kingdom” in biblical scriptures, actually refers to ruling in general, regardless of gender.¹⁴ It is unequivocally pressing that Maskoke People begin processes of decolonizing theological understandings of contemporary Maskoke Christianity by engaging critical analysis

¹⁴ Joanna Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark,” *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 476.

of both Maskoke terms and their etymologies and connotative relationships to other terms that are inherently inseparable from the holistic philosophical framework of the People. While this process is vital, it must be juxtaposed with the same analysis of other Biblical languages in order to continue fostering a healthy Christianity among Maskoke People that affirms and respects Traditional Maskoke lifeways.

Maskoke language does not possess words like: religion, music, art, philosophy etc., given that these categories compartmentalized by Western society, especially in academia, cannot be separated from the everyday life of the People. However, today many Indigenous persons are intentionally seeking linguistic agency in efforts to participate in a variety of discourses ranging from the theological to the economic. The Maskoke term *este-cate en fulletv* has been the term designated to convey implications embedded in English words like “culture.” To communicate the meaning of *este-cate en fulletv*, one would first have to engage an understanding of the cosmological worldview of Maskoke People, which teaches that four groups of Peoples exist on this earth- red, yellow, black, and white- and all four of these groups are needed to live in a balanced way, carrying out their responsibilities given by the Creator respectively. Moreover, the application of those four colors extends to deeper roots in philosophical teachings, medicines, epistemologies and navigation of the metaphysical world. *Este-cate* literally means “Red Person/Persons,” thus it encompasses a vast range of inherent duties and identities of which one remains cognizant from years of exposure to stories and “race” roles that are played out both in daily communal life of the People and ritualized practices. Secondly, the suppletive *Fulletv* is the plural form of the infinite verb *Vretv*, meaning to “go about,” or “be around.” *Fulletv* is a

group of persons or peoples going about, and additionally placing *En* before it, demonstrates possession that the noun has of the verb. Therefore, *Este-cate En Fulletv* may be translated as: “the way Red Person/Persons go about,” (always acknowledging specific reference to Maskoke People, and not imposing on other Red Person/People groups respectively).

For Maskoke persons interested primarily in economic development or other capitalist ventures, the term “culture” becomes perceived as a cornerstone of the past, absent of current vitality or vision of reprimination, that must be remotely preserved for the integrity of a historical image of the Nation rather than perceiving it as a functioning concept of society in the present, and is inseparable from the philosophical framework of the People such as expressed in my definition of *este-cate en fulletv*.

When missionaries came to Maskoke People, like in many other contexts, they sought as their primary goal to convert a large population of the society, train a significant number of preachers to sustain the conversion task, and subsequently abandon the community. While preaching and teaching to others didactic methods of “winning souls”, the most popular theme of rhetoric for conversion transmitted from missionary to Indigenous preacher was salvation. The notion of salvation understood in that particular historical context upheld a classical Western Protestant theological definition of its time, suggesting that through one being “saved” they would spend eternity with God. While for Maskoke society, eschatological discourses and the idea of escaping the space in which one conducts renewal ceremonies, are foreign concepts—given the belief that if *Posketv* ceremony is performed each summer, the People, land and other living beings of the earth will be renewed another four seasons. However, Maskoke Peoples

have begun to reshape their economic aspirations from living a life of simplicity in balance with the earth, to a life of capitalist endeavor, notably not only here in this world but in a world that comes after one passes from this world. The most common images delivered from the pulpit in Maskoke churches to gain converts are those regarding “streets of gold” and “many mansions” as described in the Book of Revelations. Given the economic situation of many Maskoke persons, from the time of initial displacement from traditional homelands in the southeast region of the colonial U.S. boundaries, to the experience of those colonial remnants such as highest rates of suicide, alcoholism, meth-abuse, and domestic violence in contemporary living situations, the notion of a capitalist eschatological realm is altogether appealing but in the process one sacrifices her integrity and responsibility to uphold Maskoke relationships to the land.

A common text used to express the notion of salvation in Jesus alone, comes from the Acts of the Apostles where Peter is responding to the question of the court lawyers: “by what means has this man been healed”(Acts 4:9) after he and John performed activity contrary to Jewish law by healing someone on the Sabbath. He says: “Then all of you and all the people of Israel should know that it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarean whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead; in his name this man stands before you healed. There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.” (Acts 4:10,12) We must understand the linguistic precedents deriving from a historical context six hundred years prior to the book of Acts being written as George Tinker brilliantly surfaces that the Greek poet Pindar referred to the Greek god Asclepius,

the god of healing, as the “savior of his people.”¹⁵ Asclepius was referred to as the savior because he brought miracles of overnight healings to patients in his temples. Thus, salvation in this scriptural context refers to a physical healing, not spending eternity with God in heaven. As historian James Axtell tells us, upon Jesuit arrival to many communities, the priests themselves were quick to seek ways in denouncing the efficacy of Indigenous medicinal practices in order to destabilize the strongest component of the society.¹⁶ The irony here is that missionaries sought to replace an original interpretation of salvation i.e. healing, with an interpretation of their own as means of conversion for the empire. Interestingly, the Maskoke word that missionaries used to predicate their Western understanding of salvation is *vhesaketv*, which derives from the infinite verb “to breathe.” Moreover, Maskoke medicine practices rely on the breath of the *heles hayv* (maker of medicine) as an inevitable efficacious marker in union with plants from the earth during healing processes. We can see a major shift in Maskoke Christian ideologies when recognizing persons turning away from this ‘original interpretation of salvation’ through healing practices that require plants of the earth and *vhesaketv*—in its truest form—for an interpretation of salvation that that encompasses capitalist gain.

Even people who do not claim to be Christian have still had their ideas about traditions changed. Vernacularizing Christianity has reified Maskoke perceptions of the Creator, introducing an anthropomorphized entity that is understood to be on the side of humans through notions of the dependence on the will of God. Of course, Doctors of the Church and other

¹⁵ Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 71-75.

¹⁶ James Axtell, *Native and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 97.

Western Christian philosophers have long wrestled with this notion of a dependence on the will of God, noting the theological turmoil it produces, but supply theological answers such as the free will of humanity to support such claims. Dare I perpetrate explicit cultural imperialism by extending over my own People the category of mere Deism, since it is recognized that *Epohfvnkv*, understood to be the Creator or the source of all, “made all things” but does not interact in the daily lives of the People and is not anthropomorphized beyond the phrase invoked when one acknowledges the Creator: *Epohfvnkv hvlwe liketskat, nak-omvlkvt en hayetskvtet omet* (Creator, you are situated on high, and all things you have created). Anthropomorphizing *Epohfvnkv* opens the door for chaos as any individual could assume she has direct communication with *Epohfvnkv* to impact cultural transformation in the community, just as Christians often exclaim “God showed me this” or “God told me that” or “God is doing this in my life” -as though God has hands, a mouth and a brain- while the person next door makes a paradoxical claim of revelation she too received from God. Traditional Maskoke People never claim *Epohfvnkv* told them something or showed them something. Through vernacularizing Christianity, in a Maskoke context, *Epohfvnkv* gets converted into the anthropomorphized Christian God that is on the side of humans rather than the entity which glues together all of creation.

Conclusion

Indigenous Nations have come to internalize colonialism by operating on ideologies of capitalism through the commodification of land which I have attempted to demonstrate through

three examples by which this process has been initiated and fueled: the Federal recognition process, compacts with states, and vernacularizing Christianity. The very existence of a nation-state itself is contingent upon a commodified relationship to land. Since Indigenous Peoples Traditionally did not perceived land as a commodity, they did not have imperialist relationships with one another. However, Indigenous Peoples have come to adopt the essence of a nation-state identity as they continue shifting their ideological foundations to ones of capitalism where the commodification of land is at the heart of governance rather than a nationhood of proper relationships to land- as defined by the Traditional cosmology of the respective Indigenous society. This then, perpetuates a permanent and normalized imperial peace relationship between two nation-states, the United States and respective Indigenous Nations. Peace is maintained through the relationship of two nation-states. Indigenous colonization shows we can no longer look at issues of imperial peace as merely United States policies upheld by Bush or Obama in regards to relationships with nation-states like Iraq and Afghanistan, without first recognizing that the very existence of the United States itself is maintaining imperial peace through its relationship with Indigenous Peoples within its own colonial borders. So long as Indigenous Peoples do not challenge their identity as a nation-state, and engage reclamation of their proper relationships to land, they enable continuation of the imperial peace apparatus of the United States by normalizing colonial domination of one nation-state over another. Therefore Indigenous Nations must resurface decolonization discourses in a new light, not as aspiring to acquire recognition or funding from the settler state or articulating goals in terms of capitalist economic agency and growth, but rather by resisting imperial peace through simultaneously

dismantling ideologies of a nation-state and embarking on an organic resurgence of Traditional relationships to the earth.