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INDIGENOUS TIME AND SACRED CYCLES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NATIVE AMERICAN AND INDIAN TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the cyclical concept of time that Indigenous cultures, particularly Native Americans, hold sacred. By investigating the cosmologies (or worldviews) Native Americans and Indians hold regarding time, this paper offers a comparative model that sheds light on both cultures' understanding of time—not as something to be counted or measured like a series of endless numbers, but as the sacred rhythm that guides the physics of nature and the beat of the lives of communities. The paper investigates the lunar calendars and seasonal ceremonies of Native cultures in concert with the Indian Yugas (the cycles of time that form their calendar), and in so doing, it raises the possibility that both cultures have similar (and similar-sounding) philosophies about time, even when they are claimed to be different.
KEYWORDS: *Indigenous knowledge systems, cyclical time, Native American cosmology, Indian philosophy, decolonizing time.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Time is a primary concept for humankind; it is not a widespread constant, but a singularity exposed to cultural influences. Human existence is dependent on the concept of time; it is influenced not by universal constants but by the factors of culture. For some of us, time seems to stretch. For others, it appears to have flown by. When Western cultures think of time, they picture an arrow moving from left to right (or, in some cases, from down to up) along which past, present, and future events occur. This thematic visualization supports a view of human history (and prehistory) as linear, an endless progression toward the future, with the present being nothing but a hinge on which the future swings open. In contrast, many Indigenous cultures have an understanding of time that quite simply rips the linear arrow to shreds:

> The circular view of time is a perspective that sees time as cyclical and recurring, rather than linear and progressive. This worldview is often found in various Indigenous cultures, where the past, present, and future are interconnected through cycles of seasons, life, and spiritual renewal. It emphasizes the importance of natural rhythms and the repetition of life events, shaping spiritual beliefs and practices across different tribes. ("Circular View of Time")

The circular concept of time that exists within Native American and Indian cultures is the focus of this article. Both traditions see sacred time as being more than just a theoretical construct. It is a real and true thing that is experienced through rituals, storytelling, and deep ecological intelligence. Ancestors of both cultures have long passed down understandings of time as a sacred kinship with Earth, the cosmos, and lineages, past and present. This article uses a comparative analysis to show how both systems of thought contest the desacralized, commodified notion of time that has been imposed by colonial forces. They maintain a hallowed understanding of time, predicated on rebirth, equilibrium, and an unbroken linked chain of generations.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INDIGENOUS TEMPORALITIES AND SACRED COSMOLOGIES

To understand Indigenous ways of seeing time, we have to shift our own prevailing views of time in contemporary knowledge systems. These are dominated by an idea of time that comes out of Western thought, where time is often seen as an objective, measurable construct, divided, quantified, and commercialized. This linear idea of time corresponds with capitalist principles of production and advancement to the notion that time is a resource to be controlled and optimized; to do more and better, greater tasks in a straight line toward the future. In contrast, Indigenous ideas about time are more often associated with cosmology, ecology, and spirituality. The epistemological root of Indigenous temporalities links the self, community, cosmos, and land. From this viewpoint, time is not a separate notion, but an embodied experience convolutedly allied to the rhythms of the Earth. Vine Deloria Jr., Leroy Little Bear, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and other scholars have highlighted how Native American perspectives view the universe as a relationship network where time flows through natural cycles—seasons, phases of the moon, the life-death-rebirth pattern, and so on—rather than moving in a straight line.

Correspondingly, Indian philosophical traditions do not see time (*kāla)* as a linear progression but as a metaphysical cycle (*chakra*):

> In traditional Indian cosmology, time has neither a beginning nor end. Instead, it proceeds in unceasing cyclic alternations between creation and activity, followed by cessation and quietude. The universe thus has neither an ultimate beginning nor an ultimate end—creation will always be followed by destruction and then destruction by a new creation. Within the confines of this assumption, there are several different and sometimes competing systems for measuring cosmic time. (Lochtefeld and The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc. 155)

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The Hindu cosmological concept of Yuga categorizes cosmic time into repeating epochs—*Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga, and Kali Yuga*—that recur over extensive periods. Indian metaphysics, especially as articulated within the Vedanta and Sankhya systems, thinks of time as both cyclical and infinite. This is also the perspective of cosmology found in the Jain and Buddhist traditions. These traditions, however, stress that attention ought to be focused on the activities of the present moment, for that is where we have the greatest potential to effect change.

From a decolonial stance, Indigenous scholars and thinkers emphasize the necessity of restoring not just authority over land and resources but also over time. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Kyle Powys Whyte—among several other supportive voices—Indigenous knowledge systems and the forms of governance associated with them have long been knowledgeable about, and in authority over, the calendars, the work schedules, and the development milestones of their own cultural systems of time that are culturally right for them. The imposition of such systems on individuals who had no political or social association with them and who were not in any political or social authority breached human rights. The enforcement of political linear time transcended mere knowledge concerns; it also represented a political issue that intersected with human rights. Long-compacted spiritual traditions and seasonal rituals that revolved around cyclical understandings of time were suddenly undermined.

Considered from this angle, embracing Indigenous temporalities is not just a philosophical decision; it is a vital act of cultural preservation and resistance. Also, the oral traditions in Native American and Indian cultures serve as time capsules. Whereas written records anchor events in a linear past, oral narratives are interactive and energizing. They hold cosmology, memory, and ethics in a storytelling form that is always current yet preserves the knowledge contained within it. They convey not just information but also a sense of the temporal with the past, present, and future all mixing together in ritualistic speech and mythic time. Thus, this comparative analysis draws on a theoretical blend of Native knowledge, decolonial perspectives, and comparative cosmology. It takes time, not just as a neutral framework but a cultural one closely tied to place, ethics, and a certain kind of not-so-passive spirituality. Seeing as the Native American tradition and India have rich cycles of sacred time, this analysis uses a comparison to get a clearer view of both sides, to question time as it is generally reckoned today, and not to see such questioning as a backwards-looking, countercultural thing.

III. NATIVE AMERICAN CONCEPTS OF TIME: MOON CYCLES, SACRED RHYTHMS, AND ORAL CONTINUITY

Across Native American cultures, time is intricately associated with the land and articulated in diverse ceremonies. Many Indigenous nations in North America—like the Lakota, Hopi, Navajo, and Anishinaabe—perceive time in relation to lunar and seasonal cycles. These calendars are not merely instruments for keeping track of days; they serve as cosmological scaffolding for the life comprehension rhythm.

a. Lunar Calendars and Seasonal Ceremonies

The 13-moon calendar of the Lakota Nation symbolizes short-lived ecological and ceremonial conditions that moon names (like "Moon of the Popping Trees" and "Moon When the Ducks Come Back") show a basic understanding of. This timing governs not only the planting and harvesting periods but also the much-maligned and sometimes ignored (until the moon-phase time comes around) adjudication of when sacred ceremonies should be held, like the Sun Dance or auspicious Vision Quests.

The movements of the sun and stars center the Hopi ceremonial calendar, which features complex rituals held at the solstices and equinoxes. The Hopi year begins with the Wuwuchim ceremony, which starts a series of Katsina dances and agricultural rites that ensure balance between the spiritual and physical realms:

> The Hopi people have their own unique calendar which coincides with their extensive ceremonial schedule. The ceremonial calendar is divided into two sections—Katsina Season and non-Katsina Season. The seasons are planned according to the position of the Sun and the Moon, and ceremonies line up fairly close to the months of the year. (*Hopi Ceremonial Calendar*)

b. Orality and Temporal Knowledge

In indigenous cultures, storytelling is a way to shield history, cosmology, and moral principles. Rather than being static, oral traditions are dynamic and are revitalized through ritual performances that bring the ancestors' presence into the moment. Because they are attuned to nature—the seasonal shifts, animal behaviors, and celestial events that signal change—elders share the historical knowledge they guard with a kind of rhythm that embeds memory in the very landscape.

IV. INDIAN INDIGENOUS TIME CONCEPTS: YUGAS, PANCHANG, AND TRIBAL TEMPORALITIES

The time concept in Indian traditions is rich and profound and revolves around cosmological cycles and ritual calendars. In contrast with individual Hindu philosophies that define cosmic time in terms of extensive *Yugas* (ages), groups like the Santhals

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and Gonds experience a quite different kind of time, centred on the seasons, the hours of the day, agricultural rhythms, and the observance of an elaborate series of more or less private rituals. Therefore:

> The concept of time in Hinduism is multifaceted and profound. It is interwoven with the religion's philosophy, spirituality, and cosmology, and it encourages individuals to focus on the present moment, fulfil their duties, and seek self-realization to transcend the limitations of time and the material world. Time is not just a linear progression but a cyclical and eternal process in the rich tapestry of Hindu thought.(Raghvendra)

a. *Yuga* Cycles and Cosmic Time

In Hindu cosmology, the *Yuga* cycle breaks time into four main epochs. The first age is called *Satya Yuga*; the next one is called *Treta Yuga*; the third is called *Dvapara Yuga*; and the age we are living in now is called *Kali Yuga*. Corresponding roughly with the astronomical ages of Gold, Silver, Bronze, and Iron, each Yuga signifies a stage in the decline of moral and spiritual values, with *Kali Yuga* being the present and most degenerate epoch. Frameworks like this place human life within a vast cosmic cycle that endlessly repeats.

The *Mahayuga*, made up of the four *Yugas*, is a part of the grand cycle that includes Brahma's day and night, a period that lasts for billions of human years. When seen from this vast angle of time, even the significant events of an individual life or of history are put in their place, transitory moments that form a long, litigious human line in the spiritual corridor of existence.

b. *Panchang* and Ritual Timekeeping

The traditional Indian calendar, known as the *Panchang*, is based on a lunisolar system. It combines astronomical observations with the customs and requirements of the many diverse religions and cultures that make up the Indian subcontinent. Occasions for celebrations such as Diwali, Holi, or Navaratri are determined through precise, and often complex, astrological computations that take into account not only the *tithi* (lunar day) or days but also nakshatras (lunar mansions) and *yogas* (planetary alignments). Favorable timings, or muhurta, are established for almost all kinds of human activities, including births, weddings, safety net ceremonies, and even agricultural endeavors.

c. Tribal Calendars and Agricultural Festivals

Groups such as the Santhals, Bhils, and Gonds uphold ritual calendars connected in deep ways to the seasons and to patterns of agriculture. The post-harvest festival of the Santhals, called Sohrai, is a tribute to the spirits of cattle and the earth. The festival emphasizes the sanctity of labor and land, and the time that is viewed as a miraculous moment of the return of the regenerative ancestral spirits that help ensure soil fertility, the safety of the monsoon, and the return of cycles that make the coming harvest a certainty.

V. RITUAL AND TIME: EMBODYING THE SACRED CYCLE

Rituals express the sacred nature of time. In both Indigenous American and Indian traditions, communal rituals are synchronized with the natural world and its rhythms, as in the solstices, equinoxes, and seasons of planting and harvesting. Such rituals, with great performance art value, certainly involve the necessary elements of tribute to deities and ancestors and the expressing and re-expressing of the moral universe.

Indigenous cultures conduct ceremonies like the Sweat Lodge, Pipe Ceremony, and Sun Dance at specific times of year, often indicated by natural signs. These rituals mark phases of purification, renewal, and communion with ancestral spirits. Time, in this sense, is less about the ticking of clocks and more about the experience of rituals conducted at the seasonal quarters and the summer and winter solstices.

Likewise, in Indian traditions, practices such as *yajnas* (fire sacrifices), *vrats* (fasts), and *pujas* (worship rituals) are in alignment with celestial happenings. One need look no further than Kumbh Mela, celebrated at the confluence of sacred rivers and at astrologically significant moments, for an instance of time in the Indian tradition marked with revolutionary profundity, a chastening reminder of the cycle of (collective) human subsistence and the performative turning and returning of (communal) rhythms in the grand theatre of life.

VI. PHILOSOPHICAL PARALLELS: KARMA, REBIRTH, AND TEMPORAL SOVEREIGNTY

Both Native American and Indian philosophies embrace a non-linear outlook on life and time. In Indian philosophy—especially within Vedanta, Samkhya, and Jainism—the concepts of karma and rebirth tie together temporal existence across numerous lifetimes. The actions (*karma*) taken in one lifetime shape the trajectory of the soul through *samsara* (the cycle of rebirth) until *moksh*a (liberation) is achieved.

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Although cosmologies of Native Americans may not express reincarnation in the same way as other cultures, many of their tribes hold beliefs in spirit journeys, soul migrations, and the return of their ancestors. Time itself becomes a series of spirals stacked one upon another:

> Many Native American tribes believe that death is not the end but rather a transformation or a journey… When someone dies, their soul travels a path in the Milky Way toward the afterlife. Along this path, they are judged based on the way they lived their life, particularly how much they honored their community and the land. ("An Exploration")

These philosophies also emphasize the temporal sovereignty of their communities—what it means to exercise the right to establish and adhere to one's own sense of time. Indigenous communities challenge the Western imposition of "clock time" in order to regurgitate their past autonomy and re-engage with the traditions of their forebears.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR ECOLOGY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Seeing time as a cycle encourages a deep ecological consciousness. When we think of time as a regenerative loop instead of a linear resource meant to be consumed, looking after the environment becomes a kind of spiritual work. Doing subsistence farming with methods like those of my childhood—rotational agriculture, seed preservation, and seasonal migration—is an embodied way of knowing the principle of reciprocity and renewal. Thus:

> Evaluating how the circular view of time reshapes our understanding of environmental stewardship reveals that this perspective encourages sustainable practices deeply rooted in respect for nature. By recognizing that human life is part of a continuous cycle with the environment, Indigenous cultures emphasize harmony with natural processes. This approach advocates for actions that ensure resources are preserved for future generations, highlighting a long-term responsibility that contrasts sharply with exploitative practices common in linear time viewpoints. ("Circular View of Time")

Both Native American and Indian worldviews see the Earth as a sacred entity, not a commodity. When the Lakota say Mitákuye Oyás'iŋ, which means "all my relations," they invoke a philosophy of life that appreciates the interconnectedness of all beings. The Indian idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which translates to "the world is one family," quite literally broadens the scope of my moral responsibility to all beings, not just those close in space or time. Both these temporal-spiritual frameworks critique the mindset of extractivism that is driving climate change and propose ecological justices.

VIII. DECOLONIZING TIME: CULTURAL SURVIVAL AND RESISTANCE

The ongoing struggle against colonial regimes targets the removal of Indigenous ways of keeping time, such as the use of the Gregorian calendar and industrial schedules, which have disrupted local cycles and marginalized sacred practices. Colonialism not only robbed resources but also forcibly changed how Indigenous peoples experience and organize time, leading to a form of epistemic violence that deemed their cultures as 'primitive.' Scholars argue that reclaiming temporal sovereignty is essential for resisting colonialism. Indigenous groups worldwide are actively decolonizing time, rediscovering traditional calendars and practices that align with their values, and experiencing disruptions in the sacred practices of lunar months in calendars tied to local festivals in India and elsewhere. This reclamation is not merely about opposing colonial time but also about re-envisioning irregular time when such equality does not serve the sacred. As Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte reminds us, the sort of futurism we promote is rooted in ancestral time, not just in denouncement of colonization, but in envisioning futures where Indigenous values steer technological, political, and ecological systems:

> Colonially induced environmental changes altered the ecological conditions that supported Indigenous peoples' cultures, health, economies, and political self-determination. While Indigenous peoples, as any society, have long histories of adapting to change, colonialism caused changes at such a rapid pace that many Indigenous peoples became vulnerable to harms, from health problems related to new diets to erosion of their cultures to the destruction of Indigenous diplomacy, to which they were not as susceptible prior to colonization. Indigenous peoples often understand their vulnerability to climate change as an intensification of colonially induced environmental changes. (Whyte 154)

Ultimately, decolonizing time is culture-saving, an act of profound resistance, and a path to the spiritual resurgence of a people. It is reconciling to cultures that comprehend temporality in radically different ways, through sylvan ceremonies, path rituals, coming-of-age ceremonies, or through momentous collective events etched into calendars and the cosmologies held by different Indigenous nations.

IX. CONCLUSION

American Indian and Native American traditions view time as something sacred, very much unlike the linear historical narrative that modernity tends to favor. When societies around the world today face ecological crises and cultural homogenization, the countercultural perspectives of Indigenous traditions can shed brilliant light on the way forward to a more inclusive global citizenship. Time for diverse Indigenous cultures is understood to be multidimensional. It connects the now moment not just with all past human events but also with the story of all life in the cosmos—past, present, and yet-to-come—through the telling of their

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rituals and enveloping sacred narratives. Placing the events of a life within such a temporally vast context has human, ethical, and ecological implications.

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