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# An Equation of Language and Spirit: Comparative Philology and the Study of American Indian Religions

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## Abstract

Scholars of religion frequently distinguish between the religions practiced by American Indians and non-Natives, raising a question about the role of religion in constructing and preserving notions of human difference. The present article locates key assumptions about the inherent distinction of Indigenous religions in early anthropological and linguistic research on American Indians. I demonstrate that as anthropologists studied Native cultures in the late nineteenth century, they drew on evolutionary theories of language in order to construct racialized cultural classifications. Analysis of language provided a framework and foundation for research on American Indian religions. I focus on the writings produced by the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), led by the influential anthropologist John Wesley Powell, who directed the Bureau from 1879 to 1902. Drawing on philology, the science of language, BAE researchers outlined a perceived essential difference between spiritual capacities of American Indians and non-Natives.

## Keywords

indigenous religions – American Indian religions – anthropology – philology – colonialism – Bureau of American Ethnology

## I Introduction

Scholars of Native American and Indigenous religious and cultural traditions have identified conceptual problems related to the category of “Indigenous religions” which, when contrasted with “world religions,” can lead to stereotyping, the simplification of complex historical relationships, and the overgeneralization of diverse cultural practices (Tafjord 2012; Cox 2007; Geertz 2004; Martin 1984). Uncritical use of the category of Indigenous religions can contribute to assumptions that Native American and non-Native people necessarily engage in distinct, monolithic religious practices, a line of thinking inaccurate due to its inattention to highly divergent local practices as well as cultural changes preceding and stemming from historical Indigenous—European exchange. Beyond these modes of thought, we should consider another subtle yet serious potential effect of unsophisticated treatment of the category of Indigenous religions: its perpetuation of racialized notions of human difference. Although current religious studies scholarship endeavors to fairly and accurately analyze diverse cultural practices, historical discourse on religious difference emphasized inherent physical, social, and spiritual differences between Indigenous and non-Native peoples.

The present article locates historical racialized assumptions about Indigenous religions in early anthropological and linguistic research on Indigenous cultures in the Americas. Scholars including Edward Said (1976), Maurice Olender (1992), and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) have demonstrated that, in the nineteenth century, analysis of language offered an important theoretical basis for the budding scientific, comparative study of religion undertaken by European academics who sought to order the religions of the world. In what follows, I extend this line of inquiry to historical scholarship produced in the United States. I focus on writings of the influential scholar John Wesley Powell, who directed the state-supported Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) from its inception in 1879 until his death in 1902. In the late nineteenth century—a key era in the development of the academic study of religion—BAE publications drew on theories of language in order to construct racialized classificatory systems of human groups. Just as European philologists drew on language when crafting a hierarchical scale of world religions, BAE researchers used linguistic data to perpetuate a hierarchy of “civilized” and “primitive” religions.

There may appear to be some resonance between contemporary and historical interest in Indigenous languages. Today we recognize the role language plays in shaping culture and religion, and, for many Indigenous communities in the United States, increasing linguistic self-determination is currently an important initiative (Webster and Peterson 2011). BAE scholars in the late

nineteenth century believed language represented more than a means of communication; it was the exterior manifestation of an embodied essence that fundamentally structured thought. During his early years managing the BAE, John Wesley Powell directed the Bureau's resources toward the study of American Indian languages, a course of scholarship that he believed could provide the basis for understanding all facets of Native cultures. Units of language—sounds, words, phrases and sentences—were documented and analyzed, their changes charted and their meanings assessed. But for Powell, linguistic data reflected intrinsic cultural and religious predispositions, which fundamentally limited the array of religious and cultural practices possible for Native peoples. Drawing on linguistic data and using theories similar to those espoused by comparative philologists, BAE researchers emphasized an essential difference between the minds, bodies, and abilities of American Indians and Euro-Americans. Systematized analysis of Native languages, central to the BAE's early research efforts, bolstered racialized theories of cultural evolution and ultimately served as a foundation for the BAE's uneven evaluation of religious myths, rituals, and healing practices.

## II Philology, Comparative Religion, and Human Difference

The history of the study of religion is implicated in colonial systems that have sought to define and describe subjugated populations in the service of exerting control over non-Western people and the lands they have inhabited. Religious institutions and discourses on religion have played a role in imperial expansion throughout the globe, from the Americas to India to Africa (Stannard 1993; Chidester 1996; King 1999; Chidester 2004; Fitzgerald 2007). Ideas about cultural and racial difference, closely tied to the category of religion from Middle Ages through nineteenth century, have been used to divide human communities and justify unequal distribution of power and resources (Johnson 2004; Kidd 2006; Heng 2010). An examination of the science of language helps to explain how scholars were historically able to convince themselves, and others, of the scientific justification for Euro-American cultural supremacy and the religious superiority of Christianity.

Linguistic research played an important role in the development of the academic study of religion. Intellectual historian Tomoko Masuzawa has argued that the field of comparative religion grew out of comparative philology, a discipline in which scholars categorized language systems and created a hierarchy of cultural achievement based on linguistic systems. As Masuzawa notes, "at the same time, the historical, empirical, and scientific study of languages—

as this philology was and has since been understood to be—opened a new venue to explore and to scrutinize Europeans' own past and future destiny" (2005: 151). Masuzawa's 2005 book *The Invention of World Religions* received widespread attention from scholars of religion, with many responding excitedly to her investigation into the origins of the "world religions" paradigm and the discipline of comparative religions. Masuzawa suggests that the world religions paradigm grew out of an ideology that is Eurocentric rather than pluralistic in nature. As she argues, "the new discourse of pluralism and diversity of religions, when it finally broke out into the open and became an established practice in the first half of the twentieth century, neither displaced nor disabled the logic of European hegemony—formerly couched in the language of the universality of Christianity—but, in a way, gave it a new lease" (xiv). Remnants of Eurocentric thought might in this way persist, even amidst discourses of "pluralism" and in classes on "comparative religion." Much discussion about her book, including responses at a panel of the national American Academy of Religion meeting, and the subsequent publication of those essays in a special issue of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 20 (2008), has addressed the implications of Masuzawa's book for contemporary comparative religion and the discourse of world religions present in contemporary religious studies departments; the legacy of her book has functioned primarily as a broad challenge to the world religions paradigm as a clunky, contrived, crypto-theological, and/or otherwise ineffectual means for understanding and teaching about how diverse communities envision and practice religion. Yet, as Masuzawa noted in a written response to reviews of her work, many scholars have responded primarily to her brief thoughts on the implications of her work (2008: 145). A central point in her book, the role of comparative philology in the development of comparative religion, deserves more consideration. This scholarly paradigm, focused on documenting the deficiencies of particular languages and cultural practices, each furthered Eurocentric ideas of innate human difference.

Comparative philology, the study and classification of different languages into family groups, played an important role in the nineteenth century as European philosophers reimaged their history and organized human groups into taxonomies in order to explain the progression of humankind. Throughout this era, scientists argued about the origins of human difference: proponents of a monogenetic theory of human development held that all humans were of the same species, while supporters of polygenetic accounts held that people from lands other than Europe—Africa, the Americas—could not have shared ancestors with Europeans. Darwin's theory of evolution, published

in *The Origin of Species* (1859), helped to solidify belief in the single origin of the human species; however, scientists still recognized significant differences among human populations, and used scientific ideas of their day to evaluate the development and fundamental worth of different cultures (Horsman 1975). Using the study of language, philologists contributed to this debate, seeking clues to different human group's origins and mental capacities through their languages.

Rooted in Latin and Greek, *philology* originally referred to the "love of learning." In the eighteenth century, the term began to be used to refer to the science of language. Philology now may refer to diverse forms of scholarship that, while all relating to words and language, have divergent underlying assumptions and goals. For some scholars, philology refers to careful textual analysis. For others, philological analysis constitutes basic, objective investigation into language itself, detached from speakers and their contexts; these philologists examine particular components of languages, including grammar, syntax, and morphology. Significant for our understanding of language and religion are philologists who, in the nineteenth century, used pieces of language to construct narratives about the development of human cultures and civilizations. These thinkers fused the study of languages with theorization of grand human histories. They conceived of philology as a survey of the history of language, comparing different language families and organizing dialects into family trees similar to scientific taxonomies of flora and fauna (Harpham 2009).

Philology was crucial to the early research on cultures because language was thought to represent the exterior manifestation of a group's collective embodied essence. Theories of human difference fueled the study of languages, which in turn bolstered ideas about innate cultural difference. Prominent nineteenth-century philologists, including Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), and Ernest Renan (1823-1892), furthered a particular philological project that went beyond examining prominent characteristics of language groups, offering implicit and explicit pronouncements about the collective psychological development of a linguistic community. For these thinkers, unique features of a language revealed a group's spiritual capacity; the grammatical structure of a language itself offered a window into the soul. In this view, language became a marker of essential inherited traits. Humboldt, for example, saw language as "the outer appearance of the spirit of a people" (cited in Masuzawa 2005: 169). These philologists believed language provided an objective marker they could use to categorize human groups based on their essential differences. Language was thought to limit different

communities' religious beliefs, expressions, and practices; in their assessment of these cultural features, philologists reinforced notions of essential racial difference (Olender 1992).

Historical actors have long drawn on a broad array of characteristics—from the cultural and religious to the physical and biological—in order to define differences between human groups in the service of creating, maintaining, and advancing inequitable power structures. Linguistic traits have also been used to articulate human difference and justify Euro-American domination (Mignolo 1992; Alter 1999; Ashcroft 2001; Errington 2001; Harvey 2010). In the nineteenth century, arguments about the collective limits of a group's development fueled philologists' project of arranging a hierarchy of human races or families, grounded in what they saw as scientific fact. According to Schlegel, "The division of mankind into peoples and races, and the diversity of their languages and dialects, are indeed directly linked with each other, but are also connected with, and dependent upon, a third and higher phenomenon, *the growth of man's mental powers* into ever new and often more elevated forms" (cited in Masuzawa 2005: 158). These scientists viewed the trajectory of development on one plane, along which modern European culture had grown out of primitive cultural systems. Their understandings of different religions were based on ideas about innate spiritual differences that individuals were born with and could not gain through practice, even through methods of education or acculturation. There were some critics of the connections these philologists drew between language, culture, religion and race, including Friedrich Max Müller, but these scholars were in the minority in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Masuzawa 2005: 255-6).

Ultimately, the project of creating hierarchies of human groups resulted not simply in providing information about other linguistic, religious, and cultural groups, but about Europeans and their relation to other cultures. In his discussion of the relationship between philology and Orientalism, Edward Said described philology as "both a comparative discipline possessed only by moderns and a symbol of modern (and European) superiority" (1978, 132). He argued further, "the job of philology in modern culture . . . is to continue to see reality and nature clearly, thus driving out supernaturalism, and to continue to keep pace with discoveries in the physical sciences. But more than all this, philology enables a general view of human life and of the system of things" (132). Significantly, philological studies sought purportedly objective data for the construction of ideas about innate spiritual differences. This form of philology served to offer quantifiable insight into a group's mental and spiritual capacity by way of a scientific foundation for sorting and categorizing linguistic and cultural groups into a hierarchy with European culture at the top. Rather than

telling *many* stories of different religious and cultural groups, a common goal for those who today teach in departments of religious studies, philologists told *one* story about the spiritual development of all of humankind.

To date, scholarly discussion of philological ideas about religion has focused primarily on the use of language in the construction of the “world religions” paradigm, which recognizes Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity as the “great” religious traditions. Early scholars of religion organized these traditions into a hierarchy, with Christianity representing the highest form of religion. We can fruitfully apply this insight about the use of language in scholarship on religion to the American context. Intellectuals in the United States, like their European counterparts, believed that culture progressed over time and language held keys to the stages of this progression that all human societies shared. The BAE produced a great deal of research on language, much of which was acknowledged at the time as influential, not just for its own sake, for the broader truths it purportedly held for the Native people under investigation. Ultimately, theories of cultural evolution that underlay analyses of Indigenous languages served as a basis for interpretation of religious phenomena.

### III The Bureau of American Ethnology’s Anthropological and Linguistic Studies

The Bureau of Ethnology, later the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), pioneered the early American anthropological study of Native cultures. The BAE was formed as an agency of the Smithsonian Institution through an act of Congress on March 3, 1879. Major John Wesley Powell, who had fought in the Civil War and conducted geological and geographical surveys for the government, was the first director of the Bureau, serving from its inception until his death in 1902. The Bureau was charged with gathering and publishing anthropological data about American Indians in the United States. BAE ethnologists focused on varied facets of culture, including social structures, traditions, and languages. Research by Bureau scholars and affiliates was published in annual reports and bulletins and distributed widely to members of the government, scholars, Indian agents, missionaries, and the public. More than 93,700 pages were printed in the Bureau’s *Annual Reports* and *Bulletins* from 1879 until it merged with another Smithsonian anthropological office in 1965. The Bureau’s practice of sending free copies to educational institutions and scholars, as well as leaders of the government, ensured a wide dissemination of BAE research (Judd 1967).

Due to the BAE's incredible output of materials, and to its role in promoting the systematic study and professionalization of anthropology, key anthropologists of the early twentieth century recognized the influence of BAE scholarship. Writing in 1902, upon the death of Powell, the renowned anthropologist Franz Boas acknowledged the Bureau's role in advancing the field of anthropology, suggesting that through "the systematic preservation of languages, of myths, of religious beliefs... [the Bureau of American Ethnology] has contributed more than any other agency towards a harmonious development of all sides of anthropological research" (Boas 1902: 829). Furthermore, Edward Sapir, a respected linguist and scholar of American Indian dialects, noted the significance of the Bureau's investigation of Indian linguistics while acknowledging developments in the profession since the Bureau's early work: "If only by virtue of its historical position, the Bureau of American Ethnology is easily the most prominent American institution engaged in scientific research and publication on the ethnology, archaeology, physical anthropology, and linguistics of the natives of America, particularly the tribes north of Mexico" (Sapir 1917: 76). The impact of the Bureau was eclipsed by the rise of anthropology departments in universities in the early twentieth century, but at the time of its inception and through the turn of the century, the Bureau served as the foundation of anthropological study in the United States.

As its first director, Powell set the agenda for the BAE's areas of inquiry and publication activities. At the Bureau's inception, government administrators had conflicting ideas about what precisely should constitute its primary research interests. The director of the Smithsonian Institution, Spencer F. Baird, was interested in increasing the physical holdings of the museum. He hoped BAE ethnographers would focus on archaeological expeditions and gather artifacts to add to the museum's collections. Powell, who had been accustomed to pursuing his own interests as director of the Geological Survey, instead wished to focus on the ethnological pursuits that most interested him, ethnology and linguistics. He devoted much of his own time and energy to the advancement and publication of original research on Indian languages, as well as the collection of bibliographic material related to Native linguistics. His concerns initially won out; while Secretary Baird was most interested in increasing the archaeological holdings of the National Museum, "Powell insisted that continuing the survey of Indian tribes and especially of their languages must be the Bureau's first priority" (Woodbury and Woodbury 1999: 285-6). Although later he would acknowledge the interests of Congress, and shift the BAE's emphasis toward the excavation and the collection of artifacts, the first reports reflect his interests in language and culture. BAE ethnologists were encouraged to advance studies in these areas. As historian Neil Judd



notes, "When the Bureau of Ethnology was established in 1879, its limited staff was concerned almost exclusively with Indian languages, mythologies, and tribal government, for these were subjects in which the director was himself most interested" (1967: 19). In the beginning, Powell's political position helped ensure that the BAE's initial agenda reflected his own interests. Indeed, these subjects comprise the majority of the Bureau's early reports.

The BAE director's interest in Native American languages had developed, in part, out of his survey work in the West. His *Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages* was published in 1877, and the stated goal of this document was to serve as a guide for "collectors," or those who traveled to Native communities to talk with speakers of various dialects in order to learn more about the languages. This volume drew on years of research completed during his work with the United States Geological Survey. During travels for survey work, members of the expedition frequently came into contact with members of Native nations whose languages were unfamiliar to the scientists. The expedition leaders thereafter determined that there was a need for the systematic study of Native languages. When describing the origins of this focus on Indian linguistics, Powell recounted that "to intelligently prosecute linguistic research it was found necessary to make a summary of what had previously been done in this field" (1880: v). A large degree of variation in systems of notation and transcription made it difficult to adequately compare languages from different Native groups. With little guidance, researchers charged with gathering linguistic evidence in the field were confused about how best to undertake the documentation of Native languages; "those engaged in the work needed constant direction and were frequently calling for explanations" (1880: v-vi). To guide fieldworkers, and to systematize the collection of data about language, the *Introduction* served as a handbook that provided a consistent alphabet for transcribing oral languages, and provided space in which collectors could record words, phrases and sentences for the language under study. Government researchers' interest in ordering Native languages thus developed, in part, out of practical necessity.

Drawing on this data, the director set in motion the BAE's research on Indian linguistics. Many writings on language were published by the BAE in its first two decades. Edward Sapir, in a review of the BAE's research on Indian linguistics, noted that, between 1879 and 1917, the Bureau published 64 texts on American Indian language (Sapir 1917). These included general texts on languages; bibliographies of texts on language groups; texts describing language within cultural systems, including mythologies and cosmologies; lexical guides, vocabularies, dictionaries, and glossaries; grammars; and works of comparative linguistics. In addition to these works, which number over ten thousand published pages in total, researchers frequently included information on language in

ethnographic sketches of particular tribes. Discussions of language were included in articles on tribal governments, myths, and other facets of culture.

BAE ethnologists cast a wide net when gathering linguistic data, conducting research among Native groups across North America, focusing on the United States and Canada, but also gathering data on written and spoken languages in Latin American countries. Bibliographies published by the BAE included information on various language families, presented here according to the BAE's system of nomenclature: Algonquian, Athapascan, Chinookan, Eskimo, Iroquoian, Muskogean, Salishan, Siouan, and Wakashan. BAE researchers conducted original research among a variety of tribes, including the Cherokee and Choctaw in the Southwest; Klamath of the Great Basin area; Dakota, Omaha, and Ponca of the Plains; Haida and Tlingit of the Pacific Northwest, and Inuit people of Arctic. Additionally, they examined sign languages and historical forms of written language. With fieldworkers collecting data across the continent, the BAE was well poised to collect and analyze a significant amount of information on diverse Native languages; furthermore, their ability to publish and distribute research reports confirmed the BAE's influence in the area of linguistic anthropology.

#### IV Linguistic Hierarchies in BAE Publications

Because of the BAE's wide reach, it is important to consider underlying assumptions present in its anthropological and linguistic research. In its early stages of development and professionalization, American anthropology was concerned with understanding divisions of humans based along racial lines. Similar to scholarship produced in Europe in the same era, nineteenth-century anthropological study in the United States was framed by the widely held theory of cultural evolution. American scholars thought that cultures all advanced along a similar trajectory but at different rates; cultural variation was explained by the theory that some human groups had advanced further along the path. The influential American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan was a strong proponent of this idea, dividing cultures into three primary stages—savagery, barbarism, and civilization. In his major work *Ancient Society: Researches in the Lines of Human Progress From Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization* (1877), Morgan argued that mainstream culture in the United States represented civilized culture; most Native American communities he placed in stage of barbarism. According to this framework, the cultures that were furthest along in social development boasted the most complex, yet most streamlined, forms of language, government, art, music, and religion.

Discourse on the advancement of culture was prominent among professional anthropologists in the late nineteenth century. The anthropologist Otis Mason, who collaborated with BAE researchers, was a notable American contributor to the field of anthropological sciences. Mason described the discipline of anthropology by highlighting its focus on “the human race” and its concerns with the origin of humankind as well as differences between humans and animals. But the discipline was also keenly interested in identifying the “pristine mental and social condition” of humans, and in describing differences between humans based on their environments and “various stages of culture.” The ultimate goal of anthropology was discerning the supposedly “natural” divisions of humans “into races or varieties” (Mason 1880: 348). As Mason described it, the purpose of anthropological work in this era was often to perceive differences in cultures caused by different stages of evolution. This emphasis on a singular trajectory of cultural development limited the ability of anthropologists to fully appreciate the breadth of cultural differences; in historian Robert Bieder’s words, many scientists in the United States viewed Native Americans as “flawed specimen[s] of evolution” (1996: 175). Anthropologists’ desires to define and describe cultures were tied to their goals of identifying the foremost model of human culture and civilization—and likewise calling attention to the perceived deficiency of those cultures that had not reached this ideal level.

These evolutionary ideas found in anthropology were central to linguistic anthropology and comparative philology as well. Mason underscored this idea when describing the purpose of linguistic anthropology in an 1880 survey of recent anthropological publications. As a basic overview of the field, he wrote, “Linguistic anthropology is the study of language, first in its origin, as the medium of communicating thought, emotion, and volition.” Linguistic analysis began, thus, with a neutral understanding of language as a means of communication; “in this sense,” Mason wrote, “animals have language.” But the subsequent goals of linguistic anthropology moved from understanding and describing the universal human phenomenon of language to discussing the role of language in human cultural advancement. The second goal of late nineteenth-century linguistic anthropologists was to “[take] into consideration the evolution and the elaboration of language to keep pace with human progress.” Similar to the perspective of European comparative philologists, theories of cultural evolution are implicit in this orientation. Finally, Mason explained the loftiest objective of linguistic anthropology: “It is the design of the anthropologists to comprehend all the languages of the world in a vast scheme as the botanist groups his plants or the zoologist his animal specimens. In order to accomplish this end it is necessary to become acquainted with the plan

of structure of every language on earth." The very purpose of learning about varied language groups was to ultimately place them in this overarching schema; Mason held that "there are genera and species of language, that is to say, there are *summa genera*, or great divisions, which are separable into stocks, tongues and dialects" (1881: 621). Like European philologists, linguistic anthropologists in the United States believed that they could objectively define human differences based on units of language.

Ideas about cultural advancement reflect the mode of thinking found in early BAE literature. John Wesley Powell's research on language and culture are based in these ideas, reflecting a racialized mode of thinking. He drew heavily on Morgan's theories about cultural evolution, and much of the BAE's early work on Native American religions highlighted what the scientists saw as significant, innate differences between Euro-Americans and American Indians. The BAE director used Morgan's ideas in his own writings about the evolution of culture and when researching and analyzing Native languages. In his *Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages*, Powell wrote that "in many other ways the author is indebted to Mr. Morgan as the pioneer investigator of the sociology of the North American Indians" (1880: vii). Historians Richard and Nathalie Woodbury note that, "since its beginning, the intellectual thrust of the Bureau was shaped by Powell's enthusiasm for Lewis Henry Morgan's theory of cultural evolution" (1999: 284-5). Although the BAE director drew on Morgan's ideas, he used them for his own purposes. As historian Robert Bieder writes, "Where Morgan had combined kinship, institutions, family, and government, Powell sought to construct a master narrative where customs, language, mythology, were to be included in one large evolutionary structure. He did not employ his data to explicate the cultures and histories of particular tribes, but rather to use it selectively to buttress the scaffolding of his grand evolutionary theory" (1999: 177). Many articles published in the reports, authored by the director and his staff, helped to bolster this view of a hierarchy of human cultures.

These theories of cultural evolution filtered into purportedly objective accounts of Indigenous language. After gathering feedback from the researchers who were sent to gather data on Indigenous languages, and reflecting further on the information collected using the earlier 1877 edition of the *Introduction to the Study of American Indian Languages*, a revised edition of the *Introduction* was published in 1880. Powell wrote in this second edition that the book "does not purport to be a philosophic treatment of the subject of language; it is not a comparative grammar of Indian tongues" (1880: vi). However, the volume expresses an underlying assumption about the primitive nature of Native languages. The *Introduction* suggests that American

Indian linguistic systems are all fundamentally similar; the volume itself was presented as “simply a series of explanations of certain characteristics almost universally found by students of Indian languages” (1880: vi). In the first edition of the *Introduction*, the prefatory comments comprised a brief five pages; most of the 105-page handbook consisted of pages of words and phrases to direct the collectors as they gather information. However, the expanded, 228-page edition included a number of essays on Indigenous language and grammar that were framed by Powell’s ideological leanings. The first 75 pages included instructions, explanations and hints meant to aid those in the field, but these instructions reflected Powell’s commitment to the theory of cultural evolution. One of the key points presented to collectors regarded what assumed to be the “low” character of Indigenous religions; contrary to some scholars’ assertions about the complexity of Native language, the *Introduction* argued that Indian languages are “inefficient,” and that “English stands alone in the highest rank” (1880: 74c). Supplied with a guidebook and cultural assumptions, collectors entered the field. The information they produced was used to bolster research on individual Native languages as well a grand theory of linguistic hierarchies.

The BAE director’s ideas about language mapped onto and supported a theory of cultural evolution. Throughout his work, Powell affirmed that “the way of human progress is one road, though wide” (1880: xxvi). As human societies progress, he suggested, all facets of culture likewise develop from a lower state to a higher state, always forward and toward a state of perfection. In an essay on the development of barbarism into civilization, the author wrote that, for all of humankind, “linguistic progress has been slow but constant. Not all reforms and advantageous linguistic contrivances have at once succeeded; yet the evolution of language, in all times and among all peoples, has been toward the better expression of thought” (1888: 100). This emphasis on the better expression of thought was the primary manner used to rank the evolutionary development of languages.

Through philology, the BAE director believed he could objectively isolate features that represented the cultural advancement of that language’s speakers. There are a few ways in which the superiority of a language’s expression of thought was determined. One of these consisted of how ideas or concepts are expressed. Powell argued that “in the evolution of any language, progress is from a condition where few ideas are expressed by a few words to a higher [condition], where many ideas are expressed by the use of many words; but the number of all possible ideas or thoughts expressed is increased greatly out of proportion with the increase of the number of words” (1881b: 3). Again he underscored this point, comparing Indigenous languages to “civilized”

languages to suggest that, although Indian languages are complex, they are ultimately inefficient and disorganized: "It is a characteristic of the languages of savages that many words are necessary to express their thoughts, while in civilized languages the same thoughts can be expressed with a smaller number of words. Given a body of thought, then, that language is the most highly developed which uses the smallest number of words for its expression" (1888: 104). This passage suggests that the complexity of a Native language need not be assessed as a sign of its sophistication, but rather its undisciplined or unevolved nature.

In a fashion similar to European comparative philologists, documents produced by the BAE director drew a connection between the very structure of a language and its speakers' capacity for advanced thought. Powell linked the linguistic system to the ability to participate in "civilized" culture, and suggested that the evolution of language would necessarily lead to a more sophisticated capacity for expression. He wrote, "the development of barbarism into civilization wrought important changes in language. In the first place grammatic forms were more thoroughly systematized, [and] in the second place the parts of speech were more thoroughly differentiated, and as a consequence the sentences proper were organized" (1888: 114). Here he observed a process in which languages spoken by people at one level of civilization developed as they advanced along the road of progress. It was through this process of cultural advancement that more sophisticated forms of language would support civilization, which necessitated changes in language. Through this linguistic and cultural advancement, Powell believed that "words became more thoroughly representative of distinct unqualified ideas, and... new words were developed to express the new ideas of civilization" (1888: 114). Based on this theory, he believed Native languages did not, and could not, have the ability to express notions of civilized culture. This ability, he believed, was required for full participation in American society. The study of language based on these ideas emphasized inherent differences in the intellectual capabilities of Native and non-Native people.

The director of the BAE did acknowledge that some people had been exposed to both Native and non-Native languages; in fact, he believed this was one process that led to the advancement of supposedly barbaric languages. When discussing how languages evolved, Powell outlined a long and complicated scheme. He noted that, when Euro-Americans and Native Americans first began exchanging linguistic elements, the result was a form of language that adopted elements from both. This process of bringing in new linguistic features from a previously unknown language was believed to be central to the evolution of language. He described this "grammatic process," or "the way in which the old materials have

been used” in the development of languages, as comprised of four methods of combination that gave rise to new forms of language: juxtaposition, compounding, agglutination and inflection (1881b: 3). Through these processes of combination, Powell believed new words were formed and streamlined in such a way that smaller words could capture more complex ideas (1881b: 3-4). Parts of speech and sentence structure would develop through this process of advancement. Ultimately, he explained that “a language is high or low not by reason of the number of words which it contains but by reason of the degree of organization to which it has attained and the body of thought which it is competent to properly express” (1888: 104). So, in part, he judged Native languages by way of their limitations in expressing civilization.

Learning about civilization would presumably contribute to advancement in language. Yet, despite Powell’s complex discussions of language evolution, BAE publications actually raised the question if it is possible for a population to completely transition to a new language. Powell argued that “in all of those languages which have been most thoroughly studied, and by inference in all languages, it appears that the few original words used in any language remain as the elements for the greater number finally used. In the evolution of a language the introduction of absolutely new material is a comparatively rare phenomenon. The old material is combined and modified in many ways to form the new” (1881b: 3). In other words, there is always some element of the original language present among the thoughts of the speakers, with words and structures that continue to guide the speaker’s thoughts. Although Powell recommended that Native Americans learn English, his writings on the evolution of language do not definitively state that it would be possible, within one lifetime or a number of generations, for Native people to fully adapt to a new linguistic system. Based in his own theories of linguistic change, an insurmountable difference would seem to remain between speakers of Native and non-Native languages.

## V Religious Hierarchies in BAE Publications

Just as European scholars’ interest in language and spirit influenced the creation of a hierarchical tree of world religions, studies of language in the United States were central to early anthropological analysis of Native American religions. The ways in which scholars such as Schlegel and Humboldt drew on philological theories—to influence their investigation into grand human histories, movements, and schemas—resonate with the BAE director’s own

interest in and use of linguistic research. When reflecting on the analysis of Indigenous language, he revealed a similar perspective to that of European philologists. He understood that “philologic research began with the definite purpose in view to discover in the diversities of language among the peoples of the earth a common element from which they were all supposed to have been derived, an original speech, the parent of all languages” (1881a: 79). And, for this American anthropologist, like European philologists, language was the key to understanding all other elements of culture. Renan believed that language served as “a mould [sic], a corset so to speak, more binding than even religion, legislation, manners, and customs” (cited in Harpham 2009: 47). In a similar way, Powell attested that “with little exception all sound anthropologic investigation in the lower states of culture exhibited by tribes of men, as distinguished from nations, must have a firm foundation in language.” This helps to explain the centrality of language in the early vision of the BAE. For, in the director’s mind, “customs, laws, governments, institutions, mythologies, religions, and even arts cannot be properly understood without a fundamental knowledge of the languages which express the ideas and thoughts embodied therein” (1880: xv). It also underscores why scholars of Indigenous religions must consider Powell’s ideas on language, which were so significant for his analyses of myth, ritual, and other features of culture commonly associated with religion.

Ideas about hierarchies of religion reflected those about hierarchies of language. In an article on the philosophical systems of Native Americans, Powell stated simply, that, “the opinions of a savage people are childish” (1876: 252-3). When comparing Euro-American philosophies to those of Native communities, he argued that “the arts and industries of savagery and civilization are not in greater contrast than their philosophy” (1876: 253). Just as language developed along the one road of human progress, it was believed that “philosophies, also, have steadily advanced from mythology to science” (1888: 100). To illustrate this point, Powell offered a concise explanation of differences in linguistic and religious systems in the stages of savage, barbaric, and civilized culture:

The age of savagery is the age of sentence words; the age of barbarism the age of phrase words; the age of civilization the age of idea words. In savagery, picture-writings are used; in barbarism hieroglyphs; in civilization, alphabets. In savagery, there is no verb ‘to be;’ in barbarism, there is no verb ‘to read;’ in civilization, verbs are resolved into parts of speech. In savagery, beast polytheism prevails; in barbarism, nature polytheism; in civilization, monotheism. In savagery, a wolf is an oracular god; in



barbarism, it is a howling beast; in civilization, it is a connecting link in systematic zoology. In savagery, the powers of nature are feared as evil demons; in barbarism, the powers of nature are worshiped as gods; in civilization, the powers of nature are apprenticed servants (1888: 124).

Striking in this example are the connections between the capacities in these linguistic and religious realms, which for early BAE scholars were inherently linked.

At the same time, the complexity, order, and meaningfulness of many Native traditional systems, as recorded by ethnographers, challenged the evolutionary system that undergirds the BAE's early approach to anthropological study. For example, one report in the first annual report revealed evidence

of traits of character and lines of thought that yet exist and profoundly influence civilization. Passions in the highest culture deemed most sacred—the love of husband and wife, parent and child, and kith and kin, tempering, beautifying, and purifying social life and culminating at death, have their origin far back in the early history of the race and leaven the society of savagery and civilization alike. At either end of the line bereavement by death tears the heart and mortuary customs are symbols of mourning. The mystery which broods over the abbey where lie the bones of king and bishop, gathers over the ossuary where lie the bones of chief and shamin [sic]; for the same longing to solve the mysteries of life and death, the same yearning for a future life, the same awe of powers more than human, exist alike in the mind of the savage and the sage (1881b: xxvii).

However, despite making statements such as these, which underscore human similarities, we can still observe an attempt to underscore the fundamental differences between religious systems of groups along different phases of evolutionary development. An article written by Powell, published in the *American Anthropologist*, emphasized the “barbaric” nature of Native religious systems and the progressive nature of the religious development of a community. For, “in barbarism, domestic worship was ancestor worship. . . . the tribal worship developed into worship of the national gods, and was chiefly public, though many religious observances remained, intended to propitiate the minor deities and demons” (1888: 117). This insistence on highlighting divisions of culture into stages along racialized lines, barbaric Native American religion and civilized Euro-American, limited the extent to which scholars of this era analyzed religious traditions, and, for contemporary scholars, calls into question the

precision of the BAE's research on Native mythologies, burial customs, dances and other features related to religion.

Finally, just as BAE research raised questions about the extent to which Native individuals can truly advance through learning new languages, the same question exists with regard to religion; a key component of late nineteenth-century assimilation policies involved Christian missionary outreach to Native communities. However, just as speakers of Native languages will retain ideas related to their first language, the director of the BAE argued that "wherever Christian civilization comes in contact with savagery, monotheism is taught, and the people speedily learn to believe in a Great Spirit and a just God, but such belief is always more or less tainted with polytheism and other abhorrent superstitions" (1888: 102). This statement emphasizes the sentiment that elements of Indigenous culture remain even when individuals convert to Christianity. In Powell's mind, these remnants of Indigenous practice are likened to residues polluting Euro-American, Christian cultural practices.

## VI An Analysis of Zuñi Language and Religion

An example of the use of linguistic data in the assessment of religion can be found in a report on Zuñi belief and ritual in the Bureau's second annual report, published in 1883. In "Zuñi Fetiches [sic]," the anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing describes significant features of Zuñi culture and spirituality, including cosmology, traditional stories, and ritual activities. Contemporary anthropological accounts explain that a key feature of Zuñi thought is the interrelatedness of humans and the natural world (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008). Cushing's report contains this idea, highlighting the significance the Zuñi place on their relationships, in different degrees, to the land, meteorological conditions, plants, animals, and supernatural beings. Cushing begins with a discussion of Zuñi history and philosophy, describing how Zuñis perceive and evaluate the natural world. Much of his report describes the ceremonial use of small animal carvings that contain the power of the animals they represent. Cushing interweaves descriptions and images of these objects and the powers they hold with traditional stories that help to explain their relationship to the Zuñi existence. Game animals were necessary for human survival and animals of prey were guardians of the lands; all animals were regarded as potential messengers between the natural and supernatural worlds. Traditional stories contained in the report explain the distribution of different prey and game animals in different regions, and elucidate the history of the ritual worship of animals. In addition to describing material culture and history, Cushing

describes annual ceremonies honoring animals of prey and the relating gods, as well as rituals the hunters practice.

Cushing uses linguistic data to discuss different features of Zuñi belief systems. This linguistic data helps to illuminate Zuñi worldviews, yet, at the same time, it is used as evidence for what Cushing assumes is the primitive stage of Zuñi spirituality. When recounting Zuñi creation stories, Cushing uses Zuñi words with English translations. He offers useful linguistic information that explains how the Zuñi describe the geographic and topographic features of the land around them (16). In recounting myths, he notes that some archaic words are used in the telling of the myths, or in private meetings of secret societies, in order to keep the information secret. Other special words are spoken in another language to preserve the secrecy of the topic (20). In his discussion of supernatural beings, Cushing acknowledges “there are many beings in Zuñi mythology godlike in attributes,” (11), and there are beings “superior to all others in wonder and power” (10), but takes pains to note that there is not one word in the Zuñi’s language that conveys the meaning of “god” or “gods.” The anthropologist analyzes words describing different levels and types of supernatural beings, including animals of prey, sacred water animals, and “finished beings,” or those that have died. While relating this hierarchy of significance among supernatural beings, Cushing maintains that there is a lack of differentiation in the Zuñi relationships with animals and otherworldly beings. He suggests, “that very little distinction is made between these orders of life, or that they are closely related, seems to be indicated by the absence from the entire language of any general term for ‘God’” (11). He does note that “all supernatural beings, men, animals, plants, and many objects in nature” are designated by the term *á-hâ-i*, which translates to “all life” (11). But Cushing views the Zuñi belief in the deep connection of all beings as a faulty lack of distinction between humans and other beings, and this perceived lack of logical linguistic and cognitive differentiation is one of the features Powell highlights as indicative of underdeveloped languages and cultural systems.

Although Cushing includes detailed descriptions of Zuñi belief and ritual, he frames his report within a cultural evolutionary perspective, evaluating features of Zuñi culture negatively and insisting that features of religion reflect an earlier stage of cultural development. He specifically discredits Zuñi philosophy as illogical, suggesting that it is through “the confusion of the subjective with the objective” that natural elements are assumed to have qualities similar to animals they resemble (9). Cushing uses information about Zuñi beliefs as points of comparison between the beliefs of other cultures that are assumed to be on an earlier stage of cultural development, comparing Zuñi beliefs about lightning to those of Celtic, Scandinavian, and Japanese cultures (10). The

anthropologist casts an air of doubt on the spiritual beings that are members of the Zuñi network of relations, referring to them as “the supernatural beings of man’s fancy” (10). Cushing’s discussion of objects imbued with the power of animals echoes other early anthropological works on fetishism, which assume the practice is illogical and childish, and representative of primitive thought (Pietz 1985).

Ultimately, Cushing’s selective analysis of Zuñi culture fits into his assumption that they are at the “savage” stage of cultural development. Cushing asserts Zuñi lifestyle is primarily reflected through their hunting practices, “like all savages” (11). However, he completely overlooks the role of Zuñi farming practices, which for centuries enabled Zuñi people to live in more permanent dwelling places (Vlasich 2005). This fact would challenge the characterization of Zuñi people as “savages,” as farming practices would be indicative of a higher stage of cultural advancement. Cushing’s evaluation of Zuñi religious practices, bolstered with the use of linguistic data, fits neatly into the framework of the evolution of religious practices. The anthropologist implies that the stories, histories, and rituals he shares are not so much unique to the Zuñi people, but are examples of their stage of development. In Cushing’s evaluation, we find a tension between his descriptions as a participant-observer and in his desire to evaluate the data he sees in terms of a hierarchical scale that frames his larger analysis of Zuñi culture and religion.

In his introduction to the annual report containing Cushing’s findings, Powell also reiterates Cushing’s sentiments regarding the cultural development of the Zuñi people. Powell’s brief overview, summarizing Cushing’s findings and explaining their significance, discusses Zuñi ritual within his evolutionary framework, squarely placing Zuñis at the stage of savagery. Powell credits Cushing’s familiarity with Zuñi language as a sign of the soundness of his research into myths and rituals, and notes the complexity of the relationships between humans, animals, and spirits in the Zuñi worldview. However, in Powell’s assessment, these relational features are significant because they are thought to represent the current state of the Zuñi’s cultural development. Powell suggests that, in this cultural stage, the use of fetishes, which Cushing attributed to chronic misapprehensions of reason and reality, is “the chief religious means of obtaining success and protection” (Powell 1883, xxviii). Ultimately Powell believes “the philosophy of the Zuñis is an admirable example of that stage in savagery” in which participants draw on a combination of beliefs about the natural world. Such remarks highlight his interpretation of this feature as but a phase of cultural evolution. For Powell, a significant value of Cushing’s work on Zuñi religion is thus its affirmation of his evolutionary ideas about the development of culture.

## VII Conclusion

Early non-Native ethnographic encounters with Native people in the Americas were products of, and vehicles for, racialized knowledge making about human difference. The early study of Native American religions, embedded in this context, reflects theories about embodied essence and cultural development. The scientific investigation of American Indian religions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped to reinforce the widespread perception of an essential difference between Native religions and Christianity, emphasizing the supposed primitive nature of Native cultures. BAE scholars drew on hierarchal theories of cultural development in their examination of Indigenous cultures, which fundamentally influenced their written reports. Their scholarship thus reinforced racialized perceptions of the religious beliefs and practices of Indigenous people as inferior to those of Euro-American people. The BAE did not produce neutral, detached scholarship; while their reports increased the general public's knowledge about Native religions, they negatively impacted Native individuals and communities themselves by disseminating pejorative ideas about traditional Indigenous religions.

Non-Native perspectives of Indigenous religions have undergone shifts over the centuries of Native and European contact in the Americas. At its most basic, the narrative of changing Non-Native perceptions of Indigenous religions holds that mainstream attitudes toward Indigenous religions have shifted favorably. When European explorers first encountered Native communities, European chroniclers wrote that the Indigenous people they encountered were not religious. Today, however, Native religious practices are protected and even celebrated. World religions textbooks presently available often include a chapter on "Indigenous" or "Tribal" religions nestled among chapters on Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (e.g., Woodhead et al. 2009). Textbooks often present Indigenous religions as localized traditions that, despite their small-scale influence, include rich belief and ritual elements on par with those of more far-reaching traditions.

Scholars have suggested that the anthropological study of Native Americans has helped to ease historical prejudices against Indigenous religions. Historian Phillip Jenkins, in *Dreamcatchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality* (2004), suggests that, beginning in the nineteenth century, scientific research played an important role in challenging mainstream perceptions of Native traditions. He argues that anthropological examinations of Indigenous communities produced scholarship that fostered an increased public understanding and acceptance of Indigenous religion. In his view, "ethnography made respectable the idea of Indian religion" (2004: 51). In a

similar fashion, while critical of the racialized theories of cultural development of early sociologists and anthropologists, Armin W. Geertz argues that “until the emergence of fieldwork ethnography, evolutionary theories about so-called primitive society were the handmaidens of colonial, domestic, and ideological concerns,” suggesting that the advent of ethnographic methods signaled the automatic decline of these ideologies (2004: 49).

However, the development of ethnographic methods themselves did not automatically lead to an increased understanding of Native perspectives. Anthropologist Marvin Harris notes that throughout the development of anthropology, older theories continued to filter into reports that used new research techniques (1968: 143-44). This explains why, for many Indigenous communities, research has been a “dirty word,” and anthropologists, unwelcome visitors (Smith 2012). For Bureau researchers, the science of language was thought to hold keys to the cultural and religious characteristics of Indigenous groups, and linguistic research seemingly offered American anthropologists solid footing for empirically assessing divergent Indigenous groups. These techniques, honed during an era of conflicting approaches and ideologies in professional anthropology, were perceived to be more objective and could thus *strengthen* racialized assumptions about Indigenous research subjects. Just as the development of the world religions paradigm was structured by Euro-centric assumptions about the superiority of Christianity, the study of Indigenous religions developed through a lens that privileged “civilized” culture. Scholars of religion today dismiss the work of founding figures like E.B. Tylor, whose discourse on the religion of “lower races” is seen as mere arm-chair anthropology with little bearing on the real world (1870). But these ideas could yield significant consequences. In the United States, ideologies about primitiveness were applied to the study of Native Americans, and the ensuing reports widely disseminated to scholars, Indian agents and politicians who determined United States Indian policy. We must seriously consider how early scholarship on Indigenous religions, in setting a foundation for later discourse on Native American cultural systems, has perpetuated residual notions about embodied human difference and spiritual inequality.

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