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Ecotheological Dimensions in *Avatar: Fire and Ash* and Momaday's Conceptions through Indigenous Lenses

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Abstract

The research paper assesses the interchange of religion and environment through a relative study of James Cameron's *Avatar: Fire and Ash* (2025) and N. Scott Momaday's works along with Native American philosophies. It emphasizes the integral approach of indigenous spiritual practices, where land is ancestral and sacred, and nature embodies memory, history, and culture. Like many indigenous traditions that treat nature as sentient and alive, the Na'vi honour Eywa and see themselves as deeply connected to Pandora's ecosystem. Examining the animistic beliefs in the film and in native traditions shows that nature has spiritual power, highlighting the need for humans, Na'vi, and the environment to live in balance. The notion that the land is an ancestor highlights how spiritual wellness depends on environmental health. The paper further examines 'pareidolia,' the cognitive capacity to recognize patterns in nature, as a framework for interpreting indigenous views of ecological interconnectedness. With this comparison, the study shows how the Na'vi's sacred relationship with nature reflects indigenous philosophies that tie environmental care to spiritual practice and collective action. By reevaluating nature as alive and interconnected, the paper questions to ecotheological discernment sensible to today's environmental crises. It asserts that indigenous worldviews such as those in N. Scott Momaday's work on Native American perspectives which poses ways to overhaul how humans associate to nature, pushing for ecological responsibility grounded in spiritual and cultural values. *Avatar: Fire and Ash* functions as a narrative link to these ecotheological ideas, calling for a revivified interrelation to nature's sacredness.

Keywords: Ecotheology, Indigenous philosophies, Avatar, Animism, Environmental spirituality, Pareidolia.

EARTH, OUR HOME

> Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution. The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air. The global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples. The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust. (*Earth Charter* 6)

The Earth Charter, launched in 2000, serves as a global ethical framework guiding humanity toward sustainable development and environmental stewardship, begins with this passage. This powerful passage sets the tone for the Charter, emphasizing Earth's intrinsic value and humanity's moral responsibility to protect its biodiversity and ecosystems. Influenced by ecotheology, deep ecology, and process philosophy, the Charter presents Earth as a vibrant, interconnected community where human and non-human life coexist.

The phrase "sacred trust" subtly highlights the importance of religious stewardship, countering anthropocentric views that prioritize human dominance over nature. Instead, the Charter advocates for conservation and sustainability, promoting rituals, laws, and policies that honor sacred natural sites and indigenous spiritualities. Its ecotheology inspires international movements bridging faith, climate action, and biodemocracy. Native American traditions have long regarded Earth as Mother Earth, a living being deserving of respect and care. Their cosmologies view all elements of nature such as land, water, animals, plants as relational kin, bound by reciprocal responsibilities. This mirrors ecotheological themes such as interconnectedness, sacredness of place, stewardship over exploitation, and process cosmology. For example, the Lakota phrase "Mitakuye Oyasin" ("All My Relations") expresses the relational worldview that every creature and element is related and deserves reverence. This aligns with ecotheological ethics that advocate for biocentric equality. These parallels show why the Earth Charter resonates deeply with Indigenous movements like bio democracy and climate justice, forging alliances between faith-based organizations and Native communities to safeguard the planet.

The ecotheology movement, though decentralized and diverse, thrives worldwide, fostering discussions on interconnected advocacy for marginalized groups, animals, and the environment. While the term "ecotheology" might be unfamiliar to many, its essence aligns with environmentalism and human rights, prioritizing life's well-being over economic growth. This integrated approach earns it the label "web-of-life movement", recognizing the complex balance of our planet's ecological systems. It is a way of living and orienting oneself towards life, rather than a specific philosophy or religion. It is a practical path that people from various religious backgrounds can adopt to move beyond consumerism and fundamentalism. Those who embrace ecotheological perspectives often identify with their own faiths or labels Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, African, Asian, American or as poets, artists, or ordinary people. Some see themselves as "spiritual but not religious", disconnected from traditional affiliations.

If brought together, these individuals might not recognize their shared values at first, and disagreements would arise. Yet, they would unite around a common hope for the world and a spiritual outlook. Their shared intuition whispers: "Let's find the sacred in the world."

This philosophy of sacred nature is deeply echoed to the native people.

Exoticization of Indigeneity

> Carrying their flints and torches, Native Americans were living in balance with nature but they had their thumbs on the scale. -Charles C. Mann, 1491

In a review of Charles C. Mann's *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (2006), Robert Costanza points to a key insight in Indigenous ecological knowledge: Native societies saw humans as part of nature, not separate from it. This perspective shaped practices that improved rather than degraded the environment. They used controlled burns to encourage new plant growth, reduce the risk of large wildfires, and support animal habitats, which helped maintain biodiversity. They also created "forest gardens," cultivating useful plants and trees within wild vegetation to produce landscapes that looked natural but were carefully tended. Mixed cropping and other farming methods helped preserve ecological balance and support varied species. Indigenous communities boosted soil fertility as well, most famously through Amazonian Terra Preta, a long-lasting, highly fertile soil made by blending charcoal, organic waste, and other natural materials. Their approaches to hunting, farming, and water use were sustainable, avoiding overuse of resources by respecting natural cycles. Working with nature rather than dominating it, Indigenous societies preserved biodiversity, improved soil health, and managed ecosystems well, showing that humans can enhance the environment through deep ecological understanding.

To discuss the native connection with nature and ecology, James Cameron's *Avatar* sequel is chosen for this paper through the lens of indigeneity which is derived from Momaday's works. The film presents the Na'vi as a community that lives in deep harmony with their environment, where nature is not treated as a resource but as a sacred, living entity. This ecological sensitivity and spiritual bond with the land closely resemble many Indigenous worldviews across the world. During the course of reviewing literature in this area, I observed several striking similarities between the representation of the Na'vi and the ways Indigenous peoples have historically been portrayed in colonial narratives and adventure fiction.

This observation led me to relate the film to Jaap van Ginneken's concept of the "Imperial Adventure" genre. Van Ginneken argues that Hollywood remains powerful across the world because it repeatedly follows a very old storytelling pattern that originated in colonial adventure novels. These stories usually depict an exotic land, native inhabitants who live close to nature, and a Western outsider who enters this world, learns their ways, and ultimately becomes their protector or leader. While examining this framework, I found that the narrative structure of *Avatar* closely resembles these earlier colonial adventure stories in many ways.

According to Van Ginneken, Avatar is a perfect modern example of this genre, presented through advanced cinematic technology but built upon the same colonial narrative formula. Thus, although Avatar appears to celebrate indigeneity and ecological harmony, its storyline reflects a pattern where the native population ultimately depends on a Western hero for survival. This parallel reveals how Hollywood repackages older colonial myths into contemporary cinematic form, making them attractive to global audiences while subtly retaining the ideological structure of the past.

It is difficult to deny that Hollywood's enduring influence is rooted not only in its financial power or technological sophistication, but also in its ability to recycle long-standing colonial myths in visually compelling and emotionally engaging modern forms. The Imperial Adventure pattern identified by Jaap van Ginneken is clearly visible from the very

beginning sequel of *Avatar* (2009). In the film, the RDA corporation operates remotely controlled bodies known as "avatars," created by combining human DNA with that of the indigenous Na'vi so that humans can biologically adapt to the environmental conditions of Pandora. These avatars enable the humans to infiltrate the world of the Na'vi, whose land contains a highly valuable mineral called Unobtanium, worth millions per kilogram. The economic motive behind this mission is evident from the corporate discussions, especially in the conversation between Parker Selfridge and Dr. Grace Augustine in the laboratory, where he reminds her that her task is to "win the hearts and minds of the natives" (*Avatar* 2009). This line reveals the strategy of establishing trust and diplomacy as a means of advancing colonial objectives. Dr. Augustine's school and scientific engagement, the film subtly depicts the attempt to introduce and normalize Western ideology among the Na'vi population. Also throughout *Avatar: Fire and Ash* (2025), Varang is portrayed not only as a figure of aggression and destruction but also as a symbol of exotic manipulation and power politics. Her character represents how force can be redirected through temptation and strategic alliance. When she tells the Colonel, "Show me how to make thunder," (*Avatar: Fire and Ash* 2025) referring to the use of guns, it reveals her willingness to adopt the colonizer's technology for her own purposes. The Colonel's alliance with Varang thus functions less as a partnership and more as a calculated diplomatic move, using her as a means to extend control and influence.

At the same time, the narrative demonstrates what Homi Bhabha terms hybridity, a process in which the colonizer gradually adopts elements of the colonized culture. Jake Sully learns the Na'vi language, customs, and worldview, eventually becoming a hybrid figure both human and Na'vi. However, despite this transformation, his position remains centered within a Western perspective, and his role as a mediator and eventual leader reinforces his authority within the narrative structure.

The features of the Imperial Adventure genre, as described by Van Ginneken, strongly resonate here. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, the film presents Pandora as a distant, exotic space inhabited by people who are portrayed as primitive, spiritual, and deeply connected to nature. The Na'vi are represented as living in complete ecological harmony, reflecting the typical Western construction of the "noble native." Furthermore, Frantz Fanon's idea of dependency on the colonizer becomes relevant, as the conflict between the RDA and the Na'vi ultimately leads to a situation where the Western outsider becomes essential to the natives' resistance.

The conflict unfolds in a familiar pattern: colonizers attempt to dominate the land, the natives resist, and eventually the Western protagonist shifts allegiance, leads the struggle, and emerges as the saviour. Importantly, the story is narrated primarily through Jake Sully's perspective rather than through Neytiri or other Na'vi characters. As Gayatri Spivak's argument in *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* suggests, the indigenous characters are not granted an independent narrative voice. Instead, their survival and victory are mediated through Jake's actions. This reinforces the White Savior Narrative, in which the natives are depicted as unable to protect themselves without the guidance of a white hero.

This narrative structure in Avatar sequel echoes the same pattern found in colonial adventure novels such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tarzan*, and *King Solomon's Mines*, and later in films like *Dances with Wolves* and *The Last Samurai*. *Avatar* follows this pattern closely: Pandora functions as the exotic territory, the Na'vi represent the indigenous inhabitants, the RDA embodies the colonizing force, and Jake Sully is the Western outsider who assimilates into the native culture, falls in love with Neytiri,

leads the rebellion, and ultimately becomes their protector.

Although the film appears to criticize colonial exploitation, it simultaneously reinforces the idea that indigenous people require a Western intermediary for their survival. Hollywood's lasting global dominance stems from its use of such recognizable colonial myths, reshaped through modern cinematic spectacle. These stories are emotionally engaging, universally accessible, and politically non-threatening, allowing audiences to empathize with the oppressed while still placing the Western hero at the center of the narrative. From a Postcolonial lens *Avatar* sequel cannot be regarded as an entirely innovative or radical narrative. Rather, it represents a technologically sophisticated reworking of an older colonial adventure framework, one that continues to support Hollywood's cultural authority on a global scale.

However, beyond these underlying colonial ideologies and discourses, there is significant scope to approach *Avatar* through an Indigenous lens. The film opens rich possibilities for understanding the mystery of nature and the inseparable bond between the natural world and native communities, an outlook that modern humanity can learn from and value. It presents a deeper philosophical vision in which nature is not an object to be possessed, but a living presence with which the natives share a reciprocal relationship. This profound understanding of ecology, spirituality, and coexistence is the area I wish to explore further, in order to highlight its complex and elaborate philosophy as something to be appreciated, practiced, and learned from.

The Will of *Eywa*

> *Our great mother does not take sides. She only protects the balance of life.* (*Avatar* 2009)

In *Avatar*, the idea of Eywa represents a profound ecological and spiritual philosophy that guides the life of the Na'vi. As Neytiri tells Jake, "Our great mother does not take sides. She only protects the balance of life" (*Avatar* 2009). This line captures the Na'vi belief that nature is governed by balance rather than by power or possession. The forest is not merely a physical space for them but a living network of energy that connects all beings. Neytiri explains that energy is only borrowed, and one day it must be returned, suggesting a cyclical understanding of life, death, and renewal.

Although the Na'vi are nomadic, their way of life is deeply rooted in sustainability and coexistence. Every action they take reflects respect for this interconnected system. When Jake Sully kills an animal during his training, he bows and says, "I see you, brother, and thank you. Your spirit goes with Eywa. Your body stays behind to become part of the people" (*Avatar* 2009). This gesture shows that hunting is not an act of domination but one of reverence, gratitude, and acknowledgment of shared existence and sustainability. To truly belong to the Na'vi world is to be part of Eywa in both heart and spirit and it requires a disciplined commitment to this philosophy of interconnected living.

This worldview closely echoes the words of Native American activist Russell Means, who once remarked that the greatest challenge today is not racial discrimination, prejudice, or hatred, but living a genuinely traditional Indigenous life in the modern world. He suggests that modern society makes it easy to pursue money, possessions, and personal pleasure, while forgetting the deeper joy found in recognizing all living things; plants, animals, birds, and the earth itself as relatives. According to this perspective, nature is not something to be owned or exploited but something to which humans belong.

Means also reflects on the sacredness of early morning prayer, a time when the world is quiet, the earth is at rest, and humans can communicate with the "Great Mystery." This

intimate relationship with nature has existed since time immemorial, where Indigenous communities saw themselves as part of the natural world rather than its masters. The native's connection with land and nature is vast and profound that it ultimately link to their cultural identity via their stories of creation. When Momaday creates the marshy landscape in the poem *Headwaters,* he profoundly portrays the stories of the native and their connection with nature, he writes:

> Noon in the intermountain plain:
> There is scant telling of the marsh
> A log, hollow and weather-stained,
> An insect at the mouth, and moss
> Yet waters rise against the roots,
> Stand brimming to the stalks. What moves?
> What moves on this archaic force
> Was wild and welling at the source.

Similarly, the Na'vi never consider owning their land; instead, they understand themselves as belonging to it. Through Eywa, *Avatar* sequel portrays this deep affinity between nature and nativity, presenting a philosophy of life based on respect, reciprocity, and spiritual unity with the environment. These Indigenous principles of fair sharing of resources, living within ecological limits short to say sustainability, collective decision-making, peaceful conflict resolution, and compassion for humans and animals alike closely align with the vision of ecotheology. Ecotheology similarly urges people across cultures to live with respect and responsibility toward the community of life, fostering societies built on these very values. This outlook is embodied in the *Earth Charter*, a globally shaped document created through dialogue among diverse religions, scholars, and organizations, all seeking meaningful responses to the world's most pressing needs.

The Idea of *Shahaylu*

> *The sea is your home before your birth and after your death. Our hearts beat in the womb of the world. Our breath burns in the shadows of the deep. The sea gives and the sea takes. Water connects all things, life to death. Darkness to light.* (*Avatar: The Way of Water* 2022)

The Way of Water expresses a deep spiritual bond between the Na'vi and the natural world, especially the sea. As the film suggests, "The sea is your home before your birth and after your death… Water connects all things, life to death, darkness to light." For the Na'vi, water is not merely a habitat but a sacred medium that links existence, continuity, and transformation. This reflects their belief that they live in Eywa and Eywa lives within them. As Jake Sully says after Neteyam's death, "All energy is borrowed, and one day you have to give it back. Eywa holds all her children in her heart. Nothing is ever lost" (*Avatar: The Way of Water* 2022). These lines convey a cyclical understanding of life, where death is not an end but a return to the larger web of existence.

In the Na'vi way of life, nothing is taken by force against the will of nature; instead, relationships are formed through consent, balance, and spontaneity. The ritual of *Shahaylu*, where a Na'vi bonds with a chosen creature, symbolizes more than tradition, it reflects a larger ecological ethic in which animals are partners in existence rather than tools for use. Jake's becoming Toruk Makto is one such example of this sacred bonding.

At the same time, the hunting of the Tulkun for 'Amrita', a substance that halts human aging, exposes the continuing pattern of human exploitation of Pandora's resources. This act reflects the broader theme of colonial extraction that intensifies across the film series, especially toward *Avatar: Fire and Ash* (2025), highlighting the contrast between Western exploration for profit and the Na'vi's respectful coexistence with their environment. Yet, beyond this conflict, the Tulkun themselves represent a model of wisdom, memory, and ethical living that offers much to be admired throughout the series.

Land as Ancestors and Sacred

For many Indigenous cultures, land is not property but ancestor and sacred presence. The landscape carries collective memory, history, and identity. In *Avatar* sequel, this idea is reflected in the Na'vi reverence for places such as the 'Tree of Souls', the most sacred site where they commune with Eywa and the spirits of their forebears. 'Utaya Mokri', the Tree of Voices, is believed to hold the voices of Na'vi ancestors, living on through Eywa. Each clan maintains its own sacred space for example, the Cave of the Ancestors for the Metkayina Clan where spiritual connection with the earth is renewed. Through these spirit trees and landscapes, the Na'vi seek communion with what they regard as a living mother earth. A similar understanding of land appears in Native American thought, where the earth embodies shared memory and spiritual meaning. N. Scott Momaday, in the epigraph to *Earth Keeper* writes:

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk. (From the way to Rainy Mountain)

It reflects that a person should devote themselves to a remembered landscape by observing it in all seasons, imagining its sounds, colors, creatures, and movements so deeply that it becomes part of their inner life. This intimate attention reveals how landscape, when joined with spirituality, becomes a source of identity and meaning. In both contexts, land is not merely physical terrain but a sacred space that shapes life, memory, and existence.

Indigeneity, Shamanism, and Disorder

In the Avatar sequel, female characters play a crucial role in guiding the narrative toward its spiritual and emotional climax. From my perspective, it is through these women that the voice of Eywa becomes most audible and meaningful. The will of Eywa is often expressed through figures such as the Tsahìk, the clan's spiritual mother and leader who functions much like a shaman. Across many Indigenous cultures, there is always a spiritual mediator who interprets the voice of the earth and communicates nature's intentions to the community. The cogitation of Shamanism is inevitable to the native people of America though more of spiritual connection. It is more of ecological connection and healing, as said in the Preface to *The Journey of Tai-me*, "they entered upon the Northern Plains and discovered the Sun Dance and the Sun Dance Medicine, a fetish named Tai-me. The Tai-me bundle remains extant, and is the most powerful medicine in the tribe". This preservation of Tai-me and the animistic belief of the native till now act as a divine intermediary, a way to find the pathway of identity unison with nature.

In *Avatar*, this role of spiritual connection is embodied by characters like Mo'at and later Kiri.

Kiri, mysteriously born from Grace Augustine's avatar, appears to me as more than a character; she represents a living extension of Eywa's presence. Her unexplained birth suggests that she is planted by Eywa herself. When Kiri says, "I feel her heartbeat… she is there like a word waiting to be spoken" (*Avatar: The Way of Water* 2022)., it reveals her intimate and instinctive bond with the great mother. Her sensitivity to Eywa highlights the mysterious and unpredictable nature of the natural world. In moments of crisis, especially during their capture by Varang, Kiri's connection with Eywa unfolds in powerful ways, suggesting that she becomes a medium through which Eywa's will operates and justice is restored.

A striking tension emerges when science attempts to explain Kiri's experiences. Her visions and sensations are medically interpreted as symptoms of frontal lobe epilepsy, often associated with altered states of consciousness or religious ecstasy. To me, this conflict between scientific reasoning and spiritual understanding mirrors a larger historical tendency to dismiss Indigenous ways of knowing as irrational or pathological. This contrast reminded me of Francis Joy's (Post doctoral Researcher, University of Lapland, Findland) which he presented in the two days international E-Conference and his discussion of pareidolia in his work on "*Forest Sentience*," where perceptions once labelled as disorder or psychosis are reconsidered as meaningful forms of environmental awareness. Psychologist Roy Brand gives the following description of pareidolia:

> In the past, pareidolia was perceived as a sign of psychosis, but today it is commonly seen as a normal and universal human phenomenon. It is particularly evident in how children think, or in the worldview of primitive tribes, who attribute a will and consciousness to everything. Gods, humans, animals, the dead plants, the weather, and often inanimate objects, are all seen as having an appetite or will, a viewpoint, and cognitive abilities - all have a soul. [...] So, the visual image is but an extension, a capturing of the ways in which the world opens to human experience...

Psychologist Roy Brand observes that pareidolia, earlier viewed as a symptom of mental illness, is now understood as a natural human tendency to perceive intention and consciousness in the surrounding world. This is especially evident in Indigenous worldviews, where animals, plants, landscapes, and even inanimate elements are believed to possess spirit and agency. From my viewpoint, what modern psychology may categorize as a disorder can instead be interpreted as an alternative, deeply connected way of experiencing reality one that aligns closely with Indigenous beliefs, practices, and spiritual traditions.

The ideas presented in the article *Gifts from the Sentient Forest: Biocultural Heritage and Human-Tree Relations in Northern Finland* closely resonate with the portrayal of Eywa and Kiri in Avatar. The article's concept of forest sentience the belief that trees can sense, respond, remember, and participate in a living network parallels the Na'vi understanding of Eywa as a conscious, interconnected force that binds all life on Pandora. Just as the authors argue that forests should be seen as biocultural heritage rather than empty wilderness, the Na'vi regard their forests and spirit trees not as resources but as sacred spaces filled with memory, presence, and ancestral continuity.

The paper's emphasis on pareidolia and pattern-thinking also connects directly to Kiri's character. What scientists in the film interpret as a medical disorder when Kiri claims to feel Eywa's heartbeat can instead be understood, through the lens of forest sentience, as a heightened ecological awareness a way of perceiving the living presence of nature. Similarly, the idea of "remembering with trees" reflects the role of the Tree of Souls and Tree of Voices, where the Na'vi communicate with their ancestors through living trees. Thus, Kiri's spiritual sensitivity and Eywa's living network embody the very principles the article describes: a worldview in which forests are not passive landscapes but active, sensing participants in the web of life.

Even from a biological perspective, the Na'vi's repeated connection with trees and their use of them in healing rituals reflects an idea that has growing scientific support: trees can have a calming and restorative effect on the human body. Physical contact with trees and natural environments is known to help regulate the nervous system. Trees function as stable,

electrically grounded living systems, while the human body also operates through electrical signals that govern heart rhythm, brain activity, and nervous responses. Studies indicate that interaction with nature can lower stress hormones, reduce heart rate, and improve heart rate variability which is an important sign of nervous system balance. Breathing becomes deeper, and the body gradually shifts out of a fight-or-flight state into one of relaxation. In addition, trees release airborne compounds known as phytoncides, which have been linked to reduced stress and enhanced immune function. The overall effect is a measurable sense of calm and physiological reset.

These similarities also point to important ecotheological ideas. Ecotheology urges people to live with respect for the wider community of life, treating the natural world as sacred instead of something to control or consume. Eywa, a spiritual force that sustains balance rather than choosing sides, embodies this vision of interconnected existence. The Na'vi's bond with their environment, rooted in reciprocity, gratitude, and coexistence, reflects the ethical values found in ecotheology and expressed in frameworks like the Earth Charter. Through Kiri's connection with Eywa and the Na'vi's reverence for spirit trees, the Avatar sequel portrays an ecological spirituality in line with ecotheological thought, presenting nature not as separate from the sacred, but as part of it.

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