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Indigenous Peoples through the Lens of UNESCO

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Abstract: The engagement of UNESCO with indigenous peoples and their heritage provides insights into global norms that affect collective cultural rights, religion, and education of indigenous peoples. It also enables insights into structural and organizational challenges and opportunities indigenous peoples experience in the current world. Against this background, this paper analyzes exemplary UNESCO standard-setting documents that explicitly approach indigenous peoples. In doing so, the paper asks first, how these documents situate indigenous peoples in the context of cultural/religious diversity and education. Second, we reconstruct how UNESCO addresses the holistic education of indigenous peoples, and how does it relate to the notion of the holistic approach itself. Methodologically, the paper applies qualitative content analysis with close reading and situates UNESCO's developments in the theoretical framework of the study of religion. From this perspective, the results address ambiguities around the term "religion", when concentrated to ritual, and the possibility of convergences between universalist and holistic knowledge.

Keywords: indigenous peoples; UNESCO; culture; religion; spirituality; education; knowledge systems



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1. Introduction

For several decades, indigenous peoples have been intensively researched in various scientific disciplines, incorporated in the laws of national/local policies, and also framed within the standards of international organizations. This essay focuses on UNESCO's (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) perspective on indigenous peoples and their holistic education. UNESCO is one of the UN's (United Nations) organizations which provides a resonant space for political, scientific, jurisprudential, and religious debates to delineate the possibilities and limits of norms. It influences educational, scientific, and political systems as well as NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and other transnational activists by formulating binding and non-binding documents, policy papers, reports, speeches, education manuals, and handbooks. UNESCO has been chosen because of its relevant standard setting documents, and for its focus on education as a "right to individual development" (Niemann and Martens 2021, p. 182).

Since the early stages of its work, UNESCO has been engaged with indigenous peoples to varying degrees. This engagement has been and continues to be a complex issue in which two processes are intertwined: first, the discursive consolidation and normative constitution of ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities; and second, the process of discursively expanding different concepts. Through engagement with indigenous peoples, UNESCO concepts of education and culture, with religion as a subcategory of culture, have been modified and expended to some degree. These concepts are underpinning UNESCO's standard-setting instruments and documents, which are relevant both in international law and in educational policy and practice around the world. The documents indicate the extensive interpretive power in global governance and enable the high visibility of indigenous peoples and their issues.

Against this background, this paper analyses a selection of standard-setting documents. It asks how these documents situate indigenous peoples in the context of cultural/religious diversity and education, and in which direction the UNESCO concepts of religion and

education have been modified. Furthermore, it asks how does UNESCO address the holistic traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples, and what implications might arise from the interplay between holistic and universalistic education from the UNESCO perspective?

2. Methodology and Research Sources

In analyzing UNESCO's engagement with indigenous peoples, the article links to the preliminary results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the UNESCO corpus from 1948 to 2018 in the research project "Transnational Discourses on Education—Religion in Focus".¹ The analysis that precedes this paper identifies three phases of UNESCO activity as well as the diachronic change in the concept of religion: the build-up phase from the 1960s to the 1970s, the consolidation phase from the 1970s to the 2000s, and the phase of multi-layered developments of educational programs and foci from the 2000s to the present (Štimac and Fehlhaber 2022). The reconstructed UNESCO concept of religion from a diachronic perspective follows a certain pattern. Although in the first phase, particular institutionalized religions have their say, the focus of UNESCO's work in the second phase is on interreligious dialogue. In the third phase, diversity is central for UNESCO and thus the embedding of religion in this context. Furthermore, the first two phases involve a concept of culture based on cultural difference, intercultural/interreligious educational approach, and the concept of world religions, despite all the diversity of religious phenomena and social forms of religion discussed at UNESCO conferences (Štimac and Fehlhaber 2022, p. 138f). In the first two phases, rudiments of UNESCO focus on indigenous peoples can be found in documents from the 1960s to the 1980s that address, for example, ethnobotanical diversity, biosphere, and biopiracy (Barrau 1966; Ruddle and Johannes 1985). However, in the third phase, which is relevant for the present article, indigenous peoples are included in conventions, declarations, policy papers, and strategies which deal with culture/religion and education against the background of diversity. This phase of UNESCO's work is characterized by the expansion of these concepts as a result of diverse debates. In this paper, relevant documents from the third phase are analyzed, as they directly address all different spheres of life and work of the indigenous peoples. These documents are the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2001), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003), and the UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples (UNESCO 2018a).

In order to reconstruct the course of UNESCO's engagement with indigenous peoples, the paper analyses different documents applying content analysis (Mayring 2008) and embedding it in discourse analysis with a sociological emphasis (Schwab-Trapp 2001). The structural analysis of documents, as the first step of content analysis, serves to enable the identification and articulation of topics and themes that showed discursive continuity and those that joined the discourse over time, along with shifts in argumentation. Within the structural analysis, distinctions were made according to source type, topics, and statements: firstly, standard-setting documents such as binding conventions and non-binding declarations, and secondly, policy papers that either address indigenous peoples, and/or are aimed at decision makers in the field of engagement with indigenous peoples. Following this, the analysis categorized key passages in terms of their themes and compiled them. For close analysis of contextualizations and interpretations around indigenous peoples, an inductive approach was chosen, which is open-ended in terms of its access to the topic and the formation of categories (Lamnek 1995).

In order to understand how indigenous knowledge and spirituality are located and interpreted in the individual passages, three standard-setting documents were selected (a) that come from the third phase of UNESCO's work; (b) which exclusively address indigenous peoples; (c) that are not designed for specific regions only but focus on global perspectives; (d) that are published by UNESCO itself (documents published by UNESCO sub-organizations are not included); and (e) that are accessible online.

3. Standard Setting Documents on Indigenous Peoples: Culture/Religion, Education

In the standard-setting documents of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2001), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003), and the UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples (UNESCO 2018a), UNESCO ties in both the normative sources by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which have been addressing indigenous peoples since the 1950s (ILO 1957) and the UN. The ILO Convention No. 169 from 1989 recognizes indigenous peoples' right to material wellbeing and spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, economic security, and equal opportunity (ILO 1957), and created the conceptual basis through the term "indigenous peoples" (ILO 2013, p. 4), and thus shaped all later developments by international organizations. This led to significant changes in constitutions, statutes, regulations, case law, and other authoritative and controlling statements, and the practices of states with substantial indigenous populations (Wiessner 2011, p. 135).

The immediate basis for UNESCO's engagement with indigenous peoples was provided by the work of the UN during the "Decade against Racism" (1973 to 1983), and later by the intensely debated document in this regard, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) of 2007.² This declaration is relevant for the analysis of the UNESCO approach to indigenous peoples, as UNESCO's policy paper from 2018 starts with the UNDRIP standards and applies them to the praxis. The UNDRIP, as a non-binding document, approaches the rights to education in the indigenous peoples' own tradition, culture (UNDRIP 2007, Art 13.1; p. 14), religion, and holistic world views (UNDRIP 2007, Art 25 and Art 34). Several provisions mention the right of indigenous peoples to operate their own schools and educational systems, providing education in their own language and in accordance with their cultural methods of teachings (UNDRIP 2007, Art 14).³ The UNDRIP addresses predominantly the collective cultural rights of indigenous peoples. Distinctive features of the UNDRIP include its recognition of and emphasis on the spiritual practices of indigenous peoples, its presentation of the education and knowledge of indigenous peoples as holistic, and its addressing of their wholeness. Although the UNDRIP is not a treaty, "it carries significant legal weight and far-reaching legal implications in international human rights law in relation to IPs and their rights". (Barnabas 2017). Although this declaration was seen as a great historical step by many, some scholars saw it as disappointing, and considered its positive value mainly rooted in the fact that it allowed indigenous peoples to become new world citizens (Krotz 2011, p. 453), thereby restoring their dignity, which had been lost in colonial times and through the "internal colonialism" of nation states (UNDRIP 2007, Art 43).

In order to better situate the concepts of culture, religion, and education of indigenous peoples in UNESCO documents, the category of traditional knowledge as defined by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues seems to be helpful and relevant, as it is mentioned in all analyzed documents. The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues understands this term as "traditional practices and culture and the knowledge of plants and animals and of their methods of propagation", also including "expressions of cultural values, beliefs, rituals and community laws, knowledge regarding land and ecosystem management" (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2007). The International Council for Science (ICSU) defines traditional knowledge as "A cumulative body of knowledge, know-how, practices and representations maintained and developed by peoples with extended histories of interaction with the natural environment" (International Council for Science 2002, p. 3). These definitions of traditional knowledge later adopted by UNESCO explicate the holistic approach to the world that touches all areas of life of indigenous peoples.

3.1. The Notion of Culture I: Diversity

The first standard-setting document analyzed here is the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2001). It extensively discusses diversity and addresses, apart from all other forms, minority and ethnic diversity such as indigenous peoples, including diverse

knowledge systems. Nevertheless, the Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2001) does not define indigenous peoples as part of cultural diversity itself. It takes into account the description by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, which include characteristics that all indigenous peoples identify with: self-identification as a member of an indigenous people; historical continuity of pre-colonial experience; a (strong) link to territories and natural sources; a distinct social, economic, or political system; distinct languages, cultures, beliefs, and identification with non-dominant groups of society (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2007). According to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, indigenous peoples number 370 million people in 90 countries and make up only about 5 percent of the world's population, but account for 15 percent of the poorest. They speak an overwhelming majority of the world's estimated 7000 languages and represent 5000 different cultures.⁴ All in all, they enrich the notion of cultural diversity on different levels.

Even though the Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2001) as a non-binding document does not utilize the term “human rights” in its preamble, it technically moves on that level. Human rights are seen as a guarantor of cultural diversity (UNESCO 2001, Article 4) and cultural rights are seen as “an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent” (UNESCO 2001, Article 5). The Declaration understands indigenous peoples as an important part of diversity and protected by human rights (UNESCO 2001, Article 4), and implies a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the rights of persons belonging to minorities and those of indigenous peoples.

The diversity in the Declaration is “embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind” and thus constitutes a “common heritage of humanity” (UNESCO 2001, Article 1). The Declaration understands culture as a complex of characteristic spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a social group. Consequently, this concept of culture can no longer be separated from identity, both on the individual and collective level. This has triggered a controversial debate on the new concept of culture, which is different from the one mentioned in the first two phases of the UNESCO's work (notion of culture based on cultural differences) (Eriksen 2012), and different generations of human rights (Spickard 2007, 2010). As already the case at the UN approach, this Declaration also applies the category of indigenous knowledge as an overarching category in which spirituality and education of indigenous peoples are subsumed. Traditional indigenous knowledge has been (1) “developed by communities in interaction with the natural environment”; (2) is “expressed through language, oral traditions, memory, spirituality, and worldview”; and (3) is manifested in a broad complex of values and beliefs. This domain includes areas such as “traditional and ecological wisdom, indigenous knowledge, ethnobiology, ethnobotany, healing systems, esoteric sciences, cosmologies, cosmogonies” (UNESCO 2001, p. 7). Which of these areas UNESCO considers relevant for joint activities with indigenous peoples, and where indigenous peoples are in need of more information according to UNESCO, are revealed in the UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples (UNESCO 2018a, 2018b), which is discussed below.

Diversity and indigenous peoples are also intertwined in the Action Plan appended to the Declaration. According to this plan, awareness of the value of cultural diversity among member states is to be raised primarily through education or by improving curricula and teacher training (UNESCO 2001, Point 7). The transition to indigenous peoples is created through the maintenance of “traditional pedagogies” (UNESCO 2001, Point 8) or indigenous, traditional knowledge and “inclusive diverse knowledge systems” (UNESCO 2001, Points 13 and 14). Policies and strategies should be formulated “for the preservation and enhancement of the cultural and natural heritage, notably the oral and intangible cultural heritage”, and a synergy between modern science and local knowledge is explicitly promoted.

3.2. The Notion of Culture II: Religion, Spiritual Tradition

Before UNESCO devoted itself intensively to indigenous peoples and indigenous knowledge in the context of diversity, it had already dealt with both institutionalized religion as

well as different social forms of religion in the first phase of its activity, until the 1970s, and with interreligious dialogue in the second phase, until the 2000s (Štimac and Fehlhaber 2022). Representatives of indigenous peoples were rarely invited to UNESCO activities such as Roads of Faith and Roads of Al-Andalus and meetings of different world religions⁵, which often included representatives from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Until now, the UNESCO concept of religion was mostly associated with the institutionalized world religions. This is also reflected in the many activities of UNESCO. Only in the third phase, parallel to the expansion of UNESCO's concept of culture, is there an expansion of the concept of religion. In the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2001), the term "cultural diversity" subsumes not only ethnic and cultural diversity, but also the widest possible range of religions and world views. This will later be supported also by the consideration of intangible heritage, which is discussed below. Consequently, it seems that all forms of religion addressed by the term "diversity" have the same possibilities for action within the framework of UNESCO. In practice, this seems to be difficult, evident in the example of indigenous peoples. The current UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), which mandated UNESCO to lead the charge in preserving endangered indigenous languages, does not involve indigenous spiritual leaders despite the fact "that indigenous cultures and languages having significant interplay with their religious traditions" (Thames and Miller 2022). Moreover, the beliefs of indigenous peoples are not denoted as indigenous *religions*, but are referred to as spiritual *traditions*, which puts the culture of indigenous peoples in the focus of UNESCO.

The content of spiritual traditions of indigenous peoples is neither a relevant topic in UNESCO standard-setting documents nor in UNESCO policy papers. Nevertheless, there are relevant sources, such as reports by José Martínez Cobo, former UN Special Rapporteur, which contain descriptions of the then-current state of indigenous beliefs by experts from different parts of the world. The beliefs of indigenous groups were reported to be animistic beliefs or animism (Martínez Cobo 1987, p. 14), or "metaphysical concepts with agrarian rituals, magic practices and pantheistic sentiments" (Martínez Cobo 1987, p. 23). Other experts were describing syncretism of indigenous religious beliefs and certain concepts and practices borrowed from colonizers or imposed by them during the colonial time (Martínez Cobo 1987, p. 23). Martínez Cobo had stated that it is essential "to know and understand the deeply spiritual special relationship between indigenous peoples and their land as basic to their existence as such and to all their beliefs, customs, traditions and culture" (Martínez Cobo 1987). Later UN reports by Erica-Irene Daes were based on the statements by indigenous peoples themselves, emphasizing the relationship of indigenous peoples with their lands, language, and memory. According to the Aborigine, the vision of different realms enfolded into sacred space (territory is concerned to be the ecological space creating consciousness) is fundamental for their identity (Daes 2001, p. 7).

The relationship of indigenous peoples to their lands and territories is not only relevant in UN reports and related documents. The spiritual heritage of indigenous peoples has consequences for the legal framework. According to Wiessner: "The *differentia specifica* of indigenous peoples, the collective spiritual relationship to their land, is what separates them also from other groups [. . .]" (Wiessner 2011, p. 129). Roland Niezen have reconstructed how current law helps formulate indigenous identity and spirituality (Niezen 2011, p. 11). This inevitably leaves some statements such as "the articulation of the essence of the indigenous worldviews" either blurred or missing entirely (Niezen 2011, p. 10). Niezen goes a step further and links the assurance of human rights to indigenous peoples with the creation of indigenous religion as two sides of the same coin. Additionally, he recognizes some similarity between framing ritual and spiritual practices as religion in the framing of collective claims to livelihood and freedom as rights of indigenous peoples, both in the interest of recognition (Niezen 2011). Both authors point to the institutionalization processes of indigenous peoples. While Wiessner foregrounds the recognition of indigenous spirituality in the legal framework, Niezen takes a stronger approach to the reflection and realignment of categorical boundaries. He sees indigenous peoples not only as beneficiaries

of the new legal situation, but also as co-creators of their own social reality through the new legislation.

3.3. *Intangible Heritage of the Indigenous Peoples*

Although the 2001 Declaration sees indigenous peoples as part of diversity and endowed with collective cultural rights, the later Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003) addresses a specific part of their culture/religion, or intangible heritage as part of that diversity. The discussion of non-physical or intangible heritage has a long tradition at UNESCO, which first ran under the term “folklore” (Testa 2016, p. 227). Already at the World Conference on Cultural Policies in 1982, indigenous cultures and their cultural heritage were discussed, and it was recommended to consider them as “intangible heritage” (UNESCO 1982, p. 92). This happens only with the Convention from 2003 and in Article 2, which also addresses the aspects of collective identity:

‘Intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. (UNESCO 2003, Art 2)

This Article further explicates that the intangible cultural heritage is manifested in oral traditions and expressions, including languages, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO 2003). By addressing the intangible heritage, the Convention addresses the heritage of communities and groups, and only seldomly individuals. The qualifying criteria for intangible heritage are specified in the Convention 2003. These criteria denote that the intangible heritage must be realized by communities and groups, and only in exceptional cases by individuals. It should be transmitted from generation to generation, and provide a sense of identity, “thus promoting respect for cultural diversity” (UNESCO 2003, Art 2). Other criteria include representativeness, authenticity, distinctiveness, and community involvement (UNESCO 2005, p. 6)

It is manifest that religion as a category plays no explicit role in the Convention from 2003. Yet, religion is very well present, as UNESCO considers religion to be a cultural system and thus a cultural phenomenon (UNESCO and DUK 2018). From this document onward, new forms and dimensions of religion, long neglected by UNESCO, have been taken into account, at least implicitly. Complementing the 2003 Convention, the Intangible Cultural Heritage homepage makes the current UNESCO world of intangible heritage visible.⁶ This includes religious rituals and religious practices as two distinct concepts. Religious practices include religious art and religious music, and are connected with sacred sites, spiritual retreats, pilgrimages, oral traditions, festivities, and processions. Religious rituals include ritual purification, dance, ritual items, etc. Examples of indigenous religion include traditional knowledge of the jaguar shamans of Yuruparí (UNESCO and ICH 2011b), the pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the Lord of Qoyllurit’I (UNESCO and ICH 2011a), the Mazu belief system (UNESCO and ICH 2009, p. 50), Manas singing (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan), the ritual ceremony of the Voladores (fertility dance) (UNESCO and ICH 2009, p. 138), the Cheoyongmu (dance to dispel evil spirits) (UNESCO and ICH 2009, p. 142), and many others (see online UNESCO n.d.). Apart from the mentioned rituals, the homepage on intangible heritage separately includes Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam with some of their rituals, as well as belief systems of Shinto, Shamanism, and of Sufism. In all these cases, when rituals and religions are presented, UNESCO applies the term “concept”. Nevertheless, the examples of religious rituals and practices on the UNESCO homepage that are not classified under individual religions, but are clearly related to them, are the most numerous.

The consideration of the above-mentioned “concepts” as the UNESCO name them, shows that the intangible heritage pays special attention to one particular dimension of religion—the ritual one. UNESCO extracts rituals from religious and spiritual traditions, considers them separately, evaluates them to be intangible and worthy of protection as part

of cultural diversity. The mentioned rituals and customs do not stand alone, and they can hardly be understood without a religious context and background. In the study of religion, the ritual dimension is only one constitutive element of institutional religions, popular religion, and new social forms of religion. Thus, UNESCO's approach could be considered a reduction in religion to only one dimension of the study of religion. Nevertheless, both UNESCO and the study of religion face the challenge of fragmenting the knowledge of indigenous peoples according to their own components and understanding of culture and religion.

Even if the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage does not consider religion as a relevant explicit category, UNESCO has made a significant step by recognizing and protecting the intangible dimension of the spiritual life of indigenous peoples, which had been discussed for many years. Thus, it has conceptually expanded its own perspective.

3.4. Education: UNESCO's Areas of Engagement

The third document relevant for the understanding of UNESCO's notion of indigenous peoples and addressing the education of indigenous peoples is the UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples (UNESCO 2018a). In this document, which is the practical application of the UNDRIP, UNESCO explicates areas of engagement "framed by the provisions from the UNDRIP which are of specific relevance to the Organization's mandated areas of work" (UNESCO 2018a, p. 9). The mandated areas include the education system, natural sciences, the ocean, social and human sciences⁷, culture, communication, and gender equality (UNESCO 2018a, p. 3). Even though UNESCO focuses on the education system separately, it explicitly addresses the opportunities and challenges associated with education in all of these areas. For this reason, all of these mandated areas are mentioned here.

The starting point for UNESCO's engagement with indigenous peoples in education systems is the idea of holistic (traditional) knowledge. According to UNESCO, incorporating the knowledge, holistic worldview, and cultures of indigenous peoples into the development of education policies and practices would provide meaningful learning opportunities that are equally available, accessible, acceptable, and appropriate for all indigenous peoples (UNESCO 2018a, p. 12). That inclusive, holistic approach of the indigenous peoples would, according to UNESCO, enable indigenous peoples to share their cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and traditional knowledge and techniques, which are essential elements of human wisdom and heritage, to enrich education systems (UNESCO 2018a). The document further states that by recognizing and applying various UN documents⁸, UNESCO "ensures the inclusion and full and effective participation of indigenous peoples to improve holistic education systems, governance, policies and programs" (UNESCO 2018a, p. 7). These quotations point to the fact that UNESCO, starting from the appreciation of holistic knowledge, strongly addresses education issues such as availability and inclusion. This is highly relevant, as for many indigenous peoples, "formal education does not reflect their distinctive cultures, languages and knowledge systems" (Nakashima 2010, p. 11).

Additionally, this execution ties into UNESCO's use of the term "holistic". The above examples show that the term is clearly applied to indigenous peoples' education and worldviews. On the other hand, under point 16, UNESCO uses the term holistic to denote its own approach to education.

Through its humanist and holistic approach to education, the Organization [UNESCO] seeks to promote the development of balanced education systems in which everyone has an equal opportunity for meaningful lifelong learning delivered through a variety of formal, non-formal, and informal pathways (UNESCO 2018a, p. 11).

The term "holistic" is used first to describe the worldviews of indigenous peoples, and second to describe the UNESCO approach to education, and thus they function at different levels. Although UNESCO does not define the holistic approach of indigenous people, the

above quotations could indicate which characteristics of the holistic worldview of indigenous peoples and the holistic UNESCO work may coincide—namely, inclusive education.

Thus, UNESCO seeks to promote the development of balanced education systems in which everyone has an equal opportunity for meaningful lifelong learning delivered through a variety of formal, non-formal, and informal pathways (UNESCO 2018a, p. 11).

In terms of education, indigenous peoples are to be supported by making teaching and learning “sensitive to their cultures, languages, ways of life, traditions, worldviews, aspirations and knowledge systems, as well as gender equality”. This allows for different measures, including (a) supporting mother-tongue education; (b) promoting non-assimilatory education that is culturally sensitive to indigenous peoples’ rights, identities, cultures, and traditional knowledge; and (c) integrating traditional knowledge into the curriculum and teaching practices of both indigenous and non-indigenous learners (UNESCO 2018a, p. 13f). UNESCO also intends to monitor the right to education for indigenous peoples as well as advocacy and raising awareness using various opportunities such as the International Day of Indigenous Peoples, the Permanent Forums (UN), and its own expert mechanism (UNESCO 2018a, p. 14).

Within the Natural Sciences Sector (with programs in freshwater, ecology, geosciences, and basic research), UNESCO recommends an inclusive approach, in which indigenous peoples are invited to address these issues through their knowledge of, for example, biodiversity loss and climate change. An appreciation of “other knowledge systems, science and technology can develop new knowledge relevant to engineering, water management and sustainable development, among others”. On the other hand, barriers that prevent indigenous peoples from accessing science should be removed (UNESCO 2018a, p. 15). At this point, UNESCO emphasizes that dialogue and coproduction between indigenous peoples and scientists enables economic, environmental, ethical, cultural, and social change to be addressed (UNESCO 2018a, p. 16).

UNESCO’s engagement in the area of social and human sciences supports indigenous peoples “in addressing the multiple challenges they face” (UNESCO 2018a, p. 19, item 57), and by promoting “the rights of indigenous peoples by tackling persistent and emerging stereotypes and prejudices” (UNESCO 2018a, p. 20, item 59). With regard to intercultural dialogue, UNESCO focuses on the historical processes in the development of relations between cultures, in particular on the role of women, youth, and minorities (such as indigenous peoples). The analyzed policy paper from 2018 quotes the Action Plan for the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013–2022) (UNESCO 2014), which describes the knowledge of indigenous peoples as a resource of “values, attitudes and behaviors to inform policies and practices for resilient and sustainable ecosystems” (UNESCO 2018a, p. 20, point 62). UNESCO projects are intended to “redress the historical injustice and inequalities” of vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples (UNESCO 2018a, p. 22, point 66). A special focus is given to young people by integrating their needs into UNESCO programs and policies (UNESCO 2018a, p. 21f.).

Another relevant UNESCO engagement area concerns the culture of indigenous peoples. Starting with the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples emphasized that indigenous peoples experience challenges to the preservation of their culture as well as threats to their cultural integrity, which includes distinct lifestyles, languages, and customary laws (UNESCO 2018a, p. 24). Another challenge is posed by natural and cultural heritage sites. According to UNESCO, many natural and cultural heritage sites constitute home to or are located within land managed by indigenous peoples (UNESCO 2018a, p. 26 subitem n). “In such places, indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional lands, territories and resources, and are partners in site conservation and protection activities that recognize traditional management systems as part of new management approaches” (UNESCO 2018a, p. 26 subitem n).

In the area of communication, UNESCO believes that for indigenous peoples, “it is of special importance to participate in inclusive knowledge societies” (UNESCO 2018a, p. 83),

as this would allow indigenous peoples to have greater access to and share information and education resources, generate income, and reinforce self-reliance. Gender equality should also permeate all areas of indigenous peoples' lives in order to "recognize and to encourage the distinct and crucial contribution of indigenous women . . . in their families, communities and in society as a whole" (UNESCO 2018a, p. 96). The UNESCO Gender Equality Action Plan 2014–2021 served this purpose (UNESCO 2019).

In conclusion, two types of UNESCO statements can be extracted from this document. First, in all UNESCO areas of activity, the respective achievements of indigenous peoples are emphasized. In the field of education, there is an appreciation of the holistic knowledge of indigenous peoples. For social and human sciences, the knowledge of indigenous peoples is considered a resource of values, attitudes, and behaviors to inform policies and practices. In the cultural field, indigenous peoples are understood as partners in site conservation and protection activities (UNESCO 2018a, p. 19). This is also the case in the natural sciences, when new perspectives are relevant to water management and sustainable development. Second, UNESCO opens its education programs such as Life Long Learning for indigenous peoples to have access to school and scientific knowledge in order to be able to participate in society (UNESCO 2018a, point 21–23). This implies that in the year 2018, there still existed numerous challenges in the structural sense (non-assimilatory education), in the organizational sense (teaching indigenous language in schools), and in the sense of educational content (integration of traditional knowledge into the curriculum and teaching practice).⁹

4. Discussion

This paper analyzed three standard-setting documents by UNESCO and asked the following questions: First, how do the selected standard-setting documents of UNESCO situate indigenous peoples in the context of cultural/religious diversity and education? Second, how does UNESCO address the holistic education of indigenous peoples? The results of the document analysis indicate two basic ambivalences with regard to UNESCO terms. The first concerns a concept of religion that focuses predominantly on ritual dimensions. The other is related to the application of the term "holistic" to both the universalistic UNESCO approach and the holistic approach of indigenous peoples.

4.1. Indigenous Peoples in the Context of Cultural/Religious Diversity

In the analyzed documents, UNESCO applies terms such as culture, religions, world religions, spiritual traditions, indigenous heritage, holistic traditional knowledge, etc. UNESCO does not define all of them but only the overarching concepts of culture and holistic indigenous/traditional knowledge.

The new concept of culture with its associated diversity agenda theoretically subsumes the largest possible number of different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups without making them explicit. Nevertheless, this concept of culture has been extensively criticized by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, who finds no fundamental innovation in the new, multifaceted concept of culture compared to the old concept. Among many other points of criticism, including the rise of identity politics and the lack of distinction between culture and ethnicity, he mentions the fact that cultures continue to be regarded as islands in that the uniqueness of the local culture and the rootedness of cultural activity are highlighted (Eriksen 2012, p. 131). This position is also problematic because, according to Eriksen, it deprives UNESCO of the justification for its insistence on a global ethic (Eriksen 2012, p. 133). He therefore recommends moving away from culture and back to the concept of education and human rights (Eriksen 2012, p. 145).

The new concept of culture gives the impression that UNESCO's concept of religion is also opening up from so-called world religions in the first two phases of UNESCO work to a variety of other social forms of religion in the third phase. The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage points theoretically in this direction, targeting a specific part of culture and thus also of religion: the intangible. Practically, under intangible

heritage, predominantly ritual and aesthetic dimensions of religions can be found, apart from a much smaller number of examples of intangible heritage by Shinto, Sufis, and others. From the point of view of the study of religion, this is a shortcut in a scientific sense. Nevertheless, the consideration of different religious dimensions as forms of intangible heritage is an important developmental step for UNESCO.

UNESCO's adoption of the concept of spiritual *traditions* (or avoidance of the term religion) takes place against the backdrop of challenges discussed in the scholarly discourse on indigenous *religions* (Kraft et al. 2020). One of these is the representation of religion, which is often seen as distorting indigenous experiences (Kraft et al. 2020, p. 183). Other challenges lie in the fact that the representation of religion is strongly associated with conceptual uncertainties arising from a variety of uses of indigenous religion (Kraft et al. 2020, p. 186).

'Religion' can and frequently does signal colonial institutions, ideologies, and practices, and all of the constraints and disfigurations this implies [...]. It can also signal the realm of the spiritual, the more-than-human, and so forth, and, as we have suggested, it sometimes becomes the translative term of choice for globalising movements. 'Religion' is thus, at turns, shielded from analytical view and yet also foundational to some contemporary forms of indigeneity. (Kraft et al. 2020, p. 183)

Siv Ellen Kraft reconstructs the term "indigenous spirituality" in documents such as the Martínez Cobo and Deas reports mentioned above, and concludes that the term "depends upon a fairly recent concept of indigeneity, born in the wake of international movement of indigenous people" (Kraft 2017, p. 88). She emphasized that the term "must be useful both on the intra-discourse level and in regard to the outside world" (Kraft 2017, p. 89), as both levels relate to the diplomatic dimension of indigenous discourse (Kraft 2017, p. 89). For UNESCO, the introduction of the concept of spiritual traditions seems to have several beneficial effects. First, it seemingly eliminates the classic dichotomy of "religious-secular", since the term can be defined very broadly. Second, spirituality is absorbed into the secular concept of indigenous knowledge and is thus made suitable for UNESCO's cultural policy. Third, there is no necessity to define the multilayered and fluid term of religion.

The generic UNESCO term "holistic knowledge", as given in many quotations of analyzed documents, stands for expressions of cultural values, beliefs, rituals, language, memory, community laws, and knowledge regarding land and ecosystem management. With this term, UNESCO is clearly situating indigenous peoples in the discourse of holism. Scientifically speaking, indigenous peoples were often situated also in the framework of animism, shamanism, and sacred environmentalism (Kraft et al. 2020, p. 3). According to Niezen, UNESCO is predominantly addressing primordialism when dealing with indigenous peoples (Niezen 2011, p. 2). In the study of religion, the religion of indigenous peoples was historically situated in earlier eras in contrast to modern and high modern differentiations (Beyer 2006; Roy 2008). In the context of the new perception of the indigenous knowledge, the exploration of the reinterpretation of their religions took place under the keywords Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism. Kraft et al., though, address the present time through questions such as, "What counts as 'indigenous religion' in today's world? Who claims this category? What are the processes through which local entities become recognizable as 'religious' and 'indigenous'? How is all of this connected to struggles for power, rights and sovereignty?" (Kraft et al. 2020, p. 3). The term holistic knowledge, which subsumes all areas of indigenous life, has not only semantic relevance but also practical functions for UNESCO. On the one hand, it is a subcategory of the UNESCO concept of culture. On the other hand, UNESCO uses it as an analogous indigenous concept to its own concept of culture. In this way, UNESCO creates an argumentative framework from which it can define only the generic term and thus dispense the definition of the individual components.

In spite of the shortcuts in terminology, UNESCO ignites globally relevant discussions and developments concerning indigenous peoples. In the field of education, UNESCO documents are helpful because they highlight the unresolved challenges of the past that

have led to discrimination, marginalization, and social problems for indigenous peoples. They also highlight the structural changes needed to support indigenous peoples' education at both the global and local levels. However, they work with some inconsistencies and generalizations regarding the concept of religion, so (religious) education can only partially rely on this UNESCO concept.

4.2. Indigenous Peoples between Universalist and Holistic Education

In the analyzed documents, UNESCO explicitly addresses the embedding of indigenous peoples' culture/religion and education in the universalistic education system, political policy, and education programs. According to Robert Jackson, who extensively wrote on religious education in the context of international organizations, these organizations seek not only to strengthen the faith-based dimension of intercultural education but also to include non-faith-based content in teaching about religion (Jackson 2008, pp. 153–55). In some of the papers, he argues for an expansion of the concept of religion to include worldviews and also the area of non-religion, thus opening up a framework in which different social forms of religion can find their way into education (Jackson 2014). Liam Frances Gearon analyzed a strong politicization in education when, for example, religion is discussed within the framework of cohesion, diversity, and pluralism and when, therefore, political goals are to be achieved in education. This can be clearly seen in the example of UNESCO's discussion of indigenous peoples. Gearon reconstructs the "historical-political paradigm" that starts from political liberalism grounded in the Enlightenment and human rights, and in which education is directed "toward ameliorating any potential conflicts inherent amidst such pluralism" (Gearon 2013, p. 132). Both positions on current education are tangential to UNESCO's concept of education. On the one hand, the space is opened for indigenous perspectives on the world and cosmogonies (in the sense of culture); on the other hand, this space is linked to political goals and purposes.

On another level, UNESCO's engagement with indigenous peoples shows that balancing the universalist approach with the particularistic holistic knowledge is a delicate matter. A direct contrast or comparison of these two education systems is missing in UNESCO documents. Moreover, UNESCO applies the term "holistic knowledge" in its own educational programs, and denotes its own educational work as holistic. Implicitly, UNESCO suggests a conceptual convergence, which is visible on the basis of the partnerships with indigenous peoples and the idea of inclusion, which is seemingly connecting UNESCO and the indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, the holistic indigenous peoples are invited to follow the UNESCO education programs to be able to participate in what UNESCO refers to as modern society. According to the policy paper from 2018, one of the relevant steps in this direction would be to acknowledge the rights of indigenous women in indigenous communities. Although universalistic and holistic education systems have been dealt with side by side in analyzed documents, UNESCO emphasizes the chances but does not debate the challenges of their convergences and divergences. One of the chances is that education would highly benefit from what UNESCO itself calls synergy between modern and local knowledge. UNESCO has taken up this track in recent documents and speaks of "knowledge democracy" by opening its doors to all knowledge systems (UNESCO 2020, p. 21). Whether this will raise questions about convergences and also about epistemological boundaries between knowledge systems will become apparent in the coming years. UNESCO promises an improvement in education as a result (UNESCO 2021, p. 51ff).

5. Conclusions

The results of the document analysis show how UNESCO includes indigenous peoples in the main standard-setting documents of the third phase of its work, and how it situates indigenous peoples in its own paradigm of culture and education. When dealing with indigenous spiritual traditions, UNESCO focuses predominantly on the ritual dimension. Simultaneously, it considers its own work and the indigenous tradition to be holistic. Regarding the concept of religion, UNESCO's documents disclose some inconsistencies and

generalizations. Nevertheless, the analyzed documents highlight the unresolved challenges of the past and they highlight the structural changes needed to support indigenous peoples' education at both the global and local levels. Moreover, UNESCO discusses universalistic and holistic education systems side by side and emphasizes the benefit from what UNESCO calls synergy between modern and local knowledge. In this sense UNESCO have broadened its own definition of both religion and education. This essay endorses the effort for educational practice in which synergy between different knowledge systems would be possible. This would not only close scientific and educational gaps, but would enable a broader view of the world and of humanity in terms of systemic thinking.

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Notes

- ¹ <https://www.gei.de/en/research/projekte/transnationale-bildungsdiskurse-religion-im-fokus> (accessed on 7 July 2022). Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Scientific Foundation)—Project No. 411557257.
- ² For the debate about the UNDRIP and collective cultural rights see (Engle 2011; Spickard 2010; Wiessner 2011; Hanson 2009).
- ³ “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning” (UNDRIP 2007, Art. 14.1)
- ⁴ https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf (accessed on 12 February 2022).
- ⁵ On the problem of terminology from the perspective of the study of religion, see (Hutter 2016, p. 14f; Cf. Masuzawa 2005).
- ⁶ <https://ich.unesco.org/dive/sdg/> (accessed on 12 February 2022).
- ⁷ For the UNESCO term social and human sciences see <https://www.unesco.org/en/social-human-sciences> (accessed on 7 July 2022).
- ⁸ For basic texts see (UNESCO 2016; UNESCO 2001; United Nations 2007; UN Development Group 2003; UN Development Group 2008).
- ⁹ Some depictions of indigenous peoples in school textbooks show the challenges. The school textbooks portray indigenous peoples as not having been able to adapt well to changing living conditions (Cusack 2014, p. 121). Other analyses show that local religions are hierarchized in the textbooks in an evolutionist way, so that, for example, magic only occurs in the context of African religions but not in the context of Hinduism (Lewis 2014, p. 200ff). Peter Ninnes reconstruct essentialization, homogenization and hierarchization in science curriculum and textbooks materials when depicting indigenous peoples. The argument of “traditional knowledge” of indigenous peoples he understands as a certain form of “cultural imperialism” (Ninnes 2000, p. 604). In the Iranian textbooks the stereotypical narrations of the Native American other end up justifying Euro-Western hegemony over them (Mirfakhraie 2018, p. 767). For other depictions and constructions of religion in school textbooks see (Stimac 2018).

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