

## ARTICULATING RELIGIOUS CHANGE: BINI THE PROPHET, THE SEER

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### Abstract

*The transmission of Christianity among Indigenous people without the involvement of European or Euro-North American missionaries has been well documented in the North American ethnographic and historical records. In the North American West, the convergence of Christianity and Indigenous religious practices is manifest in the Indigenous prophet traditions in the early nineteenth century. Although these prophet traditions predate direct contact with Euro-North Americans, much scholarship has maintained that their growth and development is explained not by Indigenous or Christian religiosity but by more fundamental material or psychological phenomena, most often connecting the prophet tradition to the indirect effects of colonial invasion. Following the oral narratives on Bini, the Witsuwit'en prophet, collected by Marius Barbeau in the 1920s, I suggest that the prophet tradition is not only a response to colonial pressures but also serves as a powerful idiom for articulating religious change and thus is a fundamentally local means of religious transformation.*

One of the most significant and widely dispersed Indigenous prophet traditions of the Northwest Plateau was led by Bini, the Witsuwit'en prophet.<sup>1</sup> Bini's influence germinated in the northern regions of the Northwest Plateau, in the central and northern Interior of British Columbia, and spread further north

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<sup>1</sup> In the ethnographic and historical literature Bini is also called called Beeny, Peni, Kwes, the Bulkley River prophet, or the Carrier prophet.

into the Subarctic Cordillera and west to the shores of the Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Witsuwit'en and Gitksan narrators report that Bini prophesied the coming of white people, the arrival of new materials technologies, and the advent of the new religion, Christianity. Bini was said to work miracles, and to have received knowledge of Christianity through dreams and visions. He was one of many Indigenous prophets labouring in the North American West in the early nineteenth century, most of whom were interested in Christianity, which was at the time novel to them.<sup>3</sup> These prophets sought to integrate this new religion, or what was known of it and of interest, into their local religious practices.

The prophet traditions of the Northwest, like prophet traditions elsewhere, such as those of Africa and Melanesia, are movements of religious reform or revitalization that revolve around individuals whose leadership and authority stem from alleged contact or communication with supernatural agents. West of the Rocky Mountains, prophet traditions were known to most Indigenous societies, from the Witsuwit'en and Sekani of British Columbia in the north to the Paiute of Nevada and Oregon in the south. Much scholarship on these traditions has emphasized the role played by material and psychological phenomenon in their growth and development. However, the oral narratives on Bini, the Witsuwit'en prophet of north-central British Columbia, collected by Marius Barbeau in the 1920s among the Gitksan, near neighbours of the Witsuwit'en, show a slightly different perspective. I suggest that they attest to prophet activity as a fundamental means for anticipating religious change, in this case the coming of Christianity, and articulating that change in an indigenous or local idiom. Prophet traditions, then, serve as the means or the mechanism of religious transformation.

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2 The term "Northwest Plateau," and later "Northwest," is used in this paper to denote a geographical region defined by Elizabeth Vibert as follows: "In geographical terms the Plateau is that region carved out by the main trenches and tributary valleys of the Columbia and Fraser river systems of the Pacific Northwest" (Vibert, *Trader's Tales*, 23). As I read her, those boundaries incorporate both the Stuart and Nechako Rivers, Witsuwit'en territory.

3 While not elaborated by Barbeau, Jenness records that at least five prophets either preceded or were contemporary with Bini: Uzakli, Senesaiyea, Leks (older brother to Bini), Bopa and Nokskan. The latter two were female prophets suggesting the vocation was gender inclusive. The documentary evidence on these figures is, compared to Barbeau's narratives on Bini, very thin.

## *Bini the Prophet, the Seer*

In this paper I briefly overview the academic conversation on the prophet movements of the Northwest, highlighting what I take to be a basic supposition shared by these scholars: that religion is, generally speaking, epiphenomenal and that prophet movements are a response to deprivation. Focusing on the example of Bini, I then offer an interpretive venture that does not exclude deprivation as an explanatory device, but considers prophecy specifically as a local mechanism for interpreting a burgeoning Christianity in a changing religious landscape.

### *Background on Prophetic Traditions in Northwestern North America*

The touchstone for the scholarly conversation about Northwest prophetic traditions is Leslie Spier's classic study *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest*. Spier concluded that a prophetic tradition of Indigenous origin was endemic to the Plateau culture area, a region encompassing the Columbia and Fraser River basins.<sup>4</sup> According to Spier, the tradition was known to all peoples of the Northwest and was manifest in each Plateau society by a local prophet or prophetic lineage.<sup>5</sup> Spier and later commentators described the tradition as a prophetic eschatology: the central figures of the tradition were prophets who were each said to have died and travelled to the land of the dead where he or she learned of the coming of an apocalypse. Upon his or her return to the living, the prophet introduced dances and teachings that would hasten the imminent destruction and renewal of the world, which was also to be accompanied by the return of the dead. More specifically, Spier observed that the tradition was typified "by a dance based on supposed imitation of the dances of

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4 The geographical region of the Northwest Plateau roughly coincides with the anthropological culture area also termed the Plateau. The "culture area," as a heuristic device, was first introduced to American anthropology by Clark Wissler in his publication *The American Indian* (1917). Wissler identified ten different culture areas in North America; each culture area consisted of an aggregate of cultures that had similar modes of ecological adaptation. The Plateau as a culture area, however, excludes Athabaskan speaking peoples, such as the Witsuwit'en. The Athabaskan peoples living in the geographical region are included within the Subarctic culture area, but this culture area stretches across the north from Alaska to Newfoundland, so is of limited use as a descriptor in this paper.

5 Spier, *The Prophet Dance*, 7.

the dead, and a conviction that intense preoccupation with the dance would hasten the happy day.” Spier continued:

From time to time men “died” and returned to life with renewed assurances of the truth of the doctrine; at intervals cataclysms of nature occurred which were taken as portents of the end. Each of these events led to the performance of the dance with renewed fervour, only to have it fall into abeyance again when their expectations remained unfulfilled.<sup>6</sup>

Spier saw Indigenous prophet activity as primarily an effect of the contemplation of natural disasters. Spier’s thesis serves as a counterpoint to James Mooney’s claim, made some decades earlier, that prophet traditions were responses to the material and social devastation caused by the colonial invasion. Mooney identified in the Ghost Dance a dynamic germane to the growth and development of many of the so called “word religions”: prophet movements, he said, whether they be the Ghost Dance or the traditions of the ancient Israelites, are *sui generis* where conditions of material or psychological deprivation apply. Subsequent analyses have since positioned Spier and Mooney at opposite ends of a debate on the question: to what degree can prophet traditions be said to be a reaction to colonialism?

Spier’s basic premise, that a prophet tradition arose under Indigenous conditions, was further refined by the anthropologist Wayne Suttles. Working specifically on the tradition as it was manifest among the Coast Salish, Suttles argued that a Plateau prophet tradition spread among Indigenous peoples and eventually arrived at the coast where it was adopted by the Salish to deal with population depletion (caused by epidemics and famine) and an ethic of individual competition introduced by fur traders. More specifically, Suttles evinced that the severe population decimation created power vacuums in traditional Salish political institutions and created a need for new leaders. Prophets competed with each other for the vacant positions and vied to become the preferred candidates for community leadership. Because prophets emerged from within Salish society and dealt with specific Salish problems, Suttles concluded that there is reason to think that a prophet tradition was endemic to northwestern

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

North America. Regardless of the source of the political disruption and discontinuity, the Indigenous prophet tradition, for Suttles, remedied the political problem.

David Aberle has argued that prophet movements are an example of the kind of “religio-magical” techniques that a people resort to when they can no longer cope with a situation of deprivation by empirical means or when practical action within the world is deemed unable to rectify a negative discrepancy between expectation and actuality.<sup>7</sup> Deward Walker built upon Aberle’s theoretical scaffolding using archaeological and documentary material to make the case that Northwest prophetic traditions were a direct response to eighteenth century crises stimulated by indirect colonial pressure, namely, epidemics, population decimation and the exposure to new wants.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, Elizabeth Vibert has appraised these theories on Indigenous prophecy, stating that the competing arguments of indigenous versus exogenous origins are both over-determined. Vibert takes a median position, arguing that “in order to understand such movements, it is essential to consider their internal logics” within the broader historical field in which they were embedded.<sup>9</sup> Providing a model for the synthesis of ethnographic and historical data, Vibert demonstrates that “the aim of prophecy was internal cleansing and renewal,” which is consistent with what she understands as the normative response of Plateau peoples to serious illness.<sup>10</sup> While prophecy was the Plateau response to any illness deemed “serious,” according to Vibert, prophecy was manifest in the early contact period as a response to a particular illness, namely, smallpox. Reminiscent of Suttles, who ultimately viewed the Salish prophet tradition more as a response to “native” problems than colonialism, Vibert observes that to link prophecies to “a contemporary epidemic is not necessarily to cast them as reactions to the colonial incursion.”<sup>11</sup> For Vibert, prophet traditions, although prompted by the effects of indirect colonial contact such as epidemics, ultimately addressed Indigenous concerns, namely, the desire for the renewal and revitalization “in an era when

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7 Aberle, “The Prophet Dance,” 81.

8 Walker, “New Light,” 252.

9 Vibert, ““The Natives Were Strong to Live,” 197-199.

10 *Ibid.*, 220.

11 *Ibid.*, 199.

the world appeared sick to the core.”<sup>12</sup>

*Religion as Epiphenomenon*

Despite the various perspectives of these scholars, there is a perspicuous point of agreement among them. All analyses connect the manifestation of a prophet tradition to dramatic and despair-inducing events. In other words, all of these scholars treat religion, in this case the prophet tradition, as epiphenomenal. Walker and Aberle posit that prophecy is a response to the deprivations induced by colonialism. For Suttles, prophecy is an Indigenous response to population decimation and an ethic of competition introduced by the fur trade. And although Spier maintains that the prophetic tradition was of Indigenous origin, he claims that it sprung from native thinking about ecological disasters, such as volcanic eruptions. Moreover, even Vibert, who writes that “it is short sighted—and one is tempted to say arrogant—to view everything that happened in the time of colonial penetration as a reaction to it,” ultimately sees the prophet activity as responses to epidemics.<sup>13</sup>

The tendency to treat religion as epiphenomenal, as the reflection of fundamental material or psychological factors, represents a rich analytical tradition in the social sciences. For example, Aberle assumed that religio-magical techniques are commonly resorted to when a people cannot cope with deprivations by empirical means and states that this is an assumption “of considerable antiquity in anthropology.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Auguste Comte writing in the first half of the nineteenth century characterized religion as the hallucinatory activity produced by an intellect “at the mercy of the passions.”<sup>15</sup> The treatment of religion as epiphenomenal continues today. Sociologist Rodney Stark offers a contemporary illustration when he cites some typical reasons that are given for the emergence of new religious movements: “change in the economic position of a particular group . . . industrialization and urbanization . . . the failure of the social system to accommodate particular age, sex and status groups [or]

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12 Ibid., 219.

13 Ibid., 220.

14 Aberle, “The Prophet Dance,” 81.

15 Comte, *The Positive Philosophy* 2, 554.

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some process of social change.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the suggestion that religion is epiphenomenal has long been criticized by proponents of the irreducibility of religion. However, it is not my intention to further this debate here, but rather to work within the longstanding tradition in the social sciences. Moreover, as Aberle and others have demonstrated the perspective is of useful analytical value.<sup>17</sup>

### *Bini and the Prophetic Tradition*

My interpretive venture in this essay explores the prophet tradition as a problem solving activity and as an endeavor that anticipates future change so as to prepare for it in the present and thereby serve as a means for religious transformation. To this end, I want to refine my data set by concentrating on the prophet tradition as it was manifest among the Witsuwi'ten and Gitksan of north-central British Columbia.<sup>18</sup>

The Witsuwi'ten and Gitksan live in the intermontane region of British Columbia along the territory defined by the lake and river tributaries of the Skeena and Fraser rivers. In the ethnographic literature the Witsuwi'ten are typically known as the Carrier, a name derived from the custom of returning (“carrying”) the cremated remains of an individual to his or her former home for further mortuary rites. Linguistically, the Witsuwi'ten speak a distinctive dialect of Athabaskan that differentiates them from their Gitksan neighbours to the north and west, who are speakers of the Tsimshian language. Although the Gitksan and Witsuwi'ten speak entirely unrelated languages, the two peoples share a similar material culture and social organization. Historically, they lived in large cedar

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16 Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 29.

17 See Aberle, *Peyote Religion* and Jorgensen, *Sun Dance*. In *Sun Dance*, for example, Jorgensen masterfully illustrates how the Ute Sun Dance promoted Indigenous individual and community interests while also serving as a point of resistance against colonial oppression.

18 Although the prophet tradition is typically cited as a Plateau phenomenon, the practice seems a matter of convention or convenience. Most scholars have acknowledged it is an inter-culture area phenomenon. For example, Spier, cited cases of the prophet dance on the coast, the plains and in the Subarctic; Suttles, studied the prophet dance among the Coast Salish; and, relevant to this discussion, Diamond Jenness and Marius Barbeau recorded the prophet tradition among the interior Witsuwi'ten.

plank houses presided over by a head chief and were sociologically organized as clans with each clan holding a number of crests and titles inherited through the matriline. It was largely these clan and kin affiliations, which are just as relevant today, that, as Antonia Mills puts it, “linked the Witsuwit̓en to all their neighbours.”<sup>19</sup> The social and cultural nearness of the two peoples suggests a possible reason for the spread and influence of Bini’s teachings among the neighbouring Gitksan. Indeed, Barbeau collected the majority of his oral narratives on the Witsuwit̓en prophet Bini in Gitksan communities. While there is no precise record of the dates of Bini’s life, the general scholarly consensus is that the Bini prophet movement started during the 1830s and possibly extended into the 1840s.<sup>20</sup>

Much of the known detail of Bini’s life can be found in the oral narratives collected by missionaries and anthropologists. Although missionaries were the first to write down narratives of the prophet’s life, their accounts tend to be quite brief. Adrien Morice (Oblate), William Collison (Anglican) and George Henry Raley (Methodist) all gave short descriptions of the origin and diffusion of the Bini movement.<sup>21</sup> In addition, a number of anthropologists collected oral narratives on Bini during the early half of the twentieth century: Diamond Jenness recorded at least three narratives among the Witsuwit̓en at Bulkley River, Viola Garfield collected one among the Gitksan at Hazelton, William Beynon recorded a Gitksan narrative, and Marius Barbeau, along with William Beynon, collected nineteen narratives over the period of 1921 to 1924.<sup>22</sup> As Barbeau’s collection is by far the richest—in fact, there is little detail included in the sum of all narratives that is not also found in his collection—I will rely on Barbeau’s data in the following analysis.<sup>23</sup>

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19 Mills, *Eagle Down is Our Law*, 39.

20 Neylan, *The Heavens*, 184.

21 Morice, *The History*, 235-236; Collison, *In the Wake*, 190-191; Raley, “Kitimaat Mission.”

22 Jenness, *The Carrier Indians*, 550-557; Miller, “Shamans,” 142-143; Joseph Bradley, “When the Bini Teachings Reached all Tribes,” vol. 3, no. 55, William Beynon Manuscripts, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver; “Bini the Prophet, the Seer,” B-F-322.1-20, MSS 2101, Marius Barbeau Northwest Coast Files, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

23 Barbeau’s narratives are found in his “Northwest Coast Files” organized under the heading “Bini the Prophet, Bini the Seer.”

## *Bini the Prophet, the Seer*

The majority of the Bini narratives are biographical but they also emphasize his prophetic revelations. The biographical material describes Bini as a shaman of chiefly lineage, a spiritually endowed, community-oriented person who is invested in traditional political and religious structures.

The narratives recount that later in life Bini had a profound and life-changing visionary experience where he was lifted into “heaven” and met with the “Chief of the Skies.”<sup>24</sup> The narratives give two different contexts for Bini’s initial vision. One is that after losing either a gambling match or a demonstration of spirit power, Bini, perhaps desiring to end his life, walked alone into the forest where he was then struck with the vision. The other is simply that Bini’s vision came to him in the course of his normative shamanic routines. Whatever the context, upon returning to his community with news of his experience, he changed his name from Kwes to Bini, meaning “mind-all-over-the-world” or “his own mind.” He spoke in a foreign language, which had to be interpreted by a “disciple,” and performed a number of songs that he said were received in a dream or vision. Bini then had subsequent dreams and each time he returned from them to the community, he shared further revelations. Teachings and practices that reoccurred in the revelations were: the sign of cross, a form of baptism (involving the bestowal of new names on those who assented to follow him), penance and confession, specific songs and dances, the seven-day week ending with one day of rest, and a set of five commandments or “the law of the five fingers.” In some accounts he is said to have received and brought back material items from the sky, specifically a prayer board and a white cloth, which were said to be instrumental in healing ceremonies.

In addition to his teachings, many narratives give detailed accounts of the miracles Bini was purported to have performed. A miracle common throughout the Bini narratives is the ripening of the Saskatoon berry bush out of season. In some accounts it is emphasized that he was able to raise himself from the dead.<sup>25</sup> The narratives also reveal Bini’s prophecies, particularly the prediction of the arrival of white people bearing new material goods, the coming of new animals (namely, cattle and horses), the construction of the telegraph line

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24 Miller, “Shamans,” 143.

25 Barbeau, *Indian Days*, 25.

and the railway, the coming of steamboats, and, assuming practical adherence to Bini's message, the probability that the dead would rise again. Most narrators emphasize that Bini's prophecies proved true; however, they lament that Bini died before he could see them come to pass.

Versions of Bini's death differ. Some maintain that his death was the result of the failure to believe in his own teachings and that after being unable to work a cure Bini, distressed at his inability, returned to the "old religion" and suffered death for his own disobedience. Other narratives attribute his death to accident, the drinking of water that was contaminated with strychnine, a commonly used poison at the time, recommended by the Hudson's Bay Company for use on wolves.<sup>26</sup>

### *Deprivations and the Prophet Tradition*

While the Bini narratives do not reveal thick historical context, they do suggest something very important about the religious landscape of the time: forms of Christian theology and practice (e.g., the commandments, the cross, and the trinity) were clearly present in the region at least as early as the 1830s at the onset of the Bini movement. And as this was decades before the first permanent mission was established at Stuart Lake by the Oblate Father Jean-Marie LeJacq in 1873, Bini had to have received his knowledge from elsewhere. A number of possibilities exist. One is that Bini was introduced to Christianity by employees working in the fur trade. The fur trade was permanently established in the area with the founding of McLeod Lake in 1805 and Ft. St. James in 1806. Fourteen years later, in 1820 Fort Kilmaurs was established on Babine Lake and Diamond Jenness suggests that an employee at Kilmaurs, William McBean, introduced the Witsuwit'en to the rosary, the cross, and Christian songs.<sup>27</sup> Another possibility is that Bini learned of Christianity from Native catechists. Barbeau, for example, hypothesized that Bini may have interacted with a group of Christianized Iroquois who had settled in the Rocky

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<sup>26</sup> Hammond, "Marketing Wildlife," 17.

<sup>27</sup> Jenness, *The Carrier Indians*, 548.

Mountains as trappers around 1810.<sup>28</sup> Leslie Spier also noted the presence of Christianized Iroquois and Métis in the Northwest in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is also possible, if we accept the later dates for the Bini movement, that Bini learned of Christianity from itinerant Catholic missionaries who visited the region in the early 1840s. The Catholic missionary Modeste Demers spent three days at Fort St. James in 1842 and three years later in 1845 Father John Nobili spent five days at the fort.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever else might be said to have influenced Bini, his teachings indicate that he was at least interested in Christianity. Such interest, however, does not rule out, as Vibert and others have suggested for the Plateau, the possibility that other elements of the colonial incursion generated a prophetic response. Indeed, a smallpox epidemic was documented in the region during the years of 1835 to 1838.<sup>30</sup> In the fall of 1835, the Tlingit had contracted smallpox from an American or British trading vessel and in the following year the contagion was reported among the Tsimshian at Fort Simpson. John Work, the trader at Fort Simpson, testified to its severity there, saying, "In ten houses there is not a man left alive only some women and children have escaped."<sup>31</sup> From Fort Simpson the Tsimshian took it with them "as far to the interior as they usually go to trade," which doubtlessly brought them into contact with the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en.<sup>32</sup> While the epidemic of the 1830s is quite possibly contemporaneous with Bini, there is little indication in Barbeau's narratives that Bini was specifically responding to smallpox, unlike some of the prophecy narratives collected by Vibert that make numerous specific references to the disease. In fact, epidemic might just as easily have stifled prophetic activity. Gibson writes, for example, that among the Tlingit the disease broke their "faith in their shamans, who, in spite of their guardian spirits perished together with those who sought their help."<sup>33</sup> The appeal to religiosity may well be a response to serious illness but

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28 M. Barbeau to L. Spier, 27 March 1933, B-F-198.9, MSS 2101, Marius Barbeau Northwest Coast Files, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

29 McIntosh, "Ft. St. James," 15.

30 Gibson, "Smallpox," 65.

31 *Ibid.*, 73.

32 *Ibid.*, 69.

33 *Ibid.*, 79.

it need not be the only response, and it is possible for a prophecy to be contemporaneous with an epidemic without there being any causal relationship. While Bini may have lived and worked through various epidemics, there is little, if any, evidence in the narratives to support the claim that he was primarily concerned with cleansing the world of disease.

But smallpox was not the only deprivation suffered. Throughout the mid nineteenth century other diseases such as influenza and whooping cough afflicted the peoples of the region. And as the ill and dying were removed from the local economy, exploitive trading relationships that favoured the Hudson's Bay Company compounded the problems created by illnesses and consequent famine. Despite the severity of these conditions, J. C. Yerbury, in his history of the Subarctic fur trade, maintains a basically positive appraisal of years from 1821 to 1860. Referring to the time as the "trading post dependency period," Yerbury writes that it was marked by "profound peace, by monopoly control over a continental domain, and by increased stability of native populations through the formation of trading post bands and trapping parties."<sup>34</sup> Yet the bulk of the evidence of the prophet tradition can be dated to these years of "profound peace." Although the conditions of the time were doubtlessly sufficient to warrant, according to Aberle's understanding of the genesis of the prophet tradition, an appeal to "religio-magical techniques," there is no indication that the period was marked by greater deprivations than earlier or later colonial times. In any case, my argument is that based on the narrative accounts of Bini's life what seems to have concerned him was not deprivation but rather the arrival or rumoured arrival of a new power, a new religion: Christianity. To be clear, I am not arguing for an essentialized view of religion or saying that only religious explanations can explain religion. Rather, I am in basic agreement with Greg Johnson's observation that it is "analytically useful to assume that all religious claims are human and only human, emerging from the present and for the purposes of the present."<sup>35</sup> In a similar vein, I suggest that Bini's actions can

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34 Yerbury, *The Subarctic Indians*, 14. The historian Robin Fisher offers a similar appraisal of the early nineteenth century remarking that prior to 1858 (the year of the Fraser River gold rush and the beginning of the settlement period) Indigenous people adapted to the fur trade on their own terms and the fur traders had to work to accommodate them. See Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*.

35 Johnson, *Sacred Claims*, 23.

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be interpreted as addressing the religious situation of his time. His reported behaviour, his speech, and actions, indicate an interest in an emerging Christianity and, more specifically, in the articulation of its advent in a way that is consistent with Indigenous religiosity.

### *Excerpts from the Barbeau Collection: Articulating Christianity*

My contention that Bini was articulating Christianity in a way that was consistent with Indigenous religiosity, namely through the idioms of prophecy and vision, is supported by two themes that echo throughout the Barbeau collection. First, Bini is reported to have had a visionary experience in which he visited “heaven” and returned with teachings and prophecies, and the majority of the latter, it is claimed, proved true. Second, the visionary revelations were received as at least as authentic as the teachings of the later Christian missionaries. All the narratives emphasize the first point and eleven of nineteen the second.

The majority of the twenty narratives compiled by Barbeau, which range in length from one to twelve pages, date from the 1920s, a decade in which Barbeau did a total of five seasons of fieldwork among the Tsimshian and Gitksan.<sup>36</sup> The following excerpts from the oral narratives on Bini contained in Barbeau’s files indicate that Bini was articulating Christianity and illuminate the authority and authenticity of Bini’s teachings vis-à-vis Christianity.

One Gitksan narrator, Charles Martin,<sup>37</sup> remarked: “What the preachers say right today, which we hear from the preachers today, we all heard from Bini before the preacher came up here. What the preacher preach of the Bible today, Bini preached us the same way

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36 Duff, “Contributions,” 65.

37 The names of the narrators given in this paper are as they appear on the typescripts found in Barbeau’s Northwest Coast Files. In addition to names, some narratives list the date and the place of the recording, however, this is not true in each case. While Wilson Duff notes that Barbeau obtained personal names and some genealogical information from every village he visited during his fieldwork, I did not gather that data in the course of my research. See Duff, “Contributions,” 66.

before the preacher came up here.”<sup>38</sup>

In his narrative dated 1924, Isaac Tens noted: “He told them the very same things that the clergyman tells to this day.”<sup>39</sup>

Moses Sanaus remarked in a narrative recorded in 1923: “He was the first one that taught the Indians to make the sign of the cross . . . He was digging the works of heaven, he was a prophet, that is why he had the power.”<sup>40</sup>

In one of Paul Dzius’ narratives collected in 1923, Dzius noted: “Bini knew all about heaven, all about what was to happen. He told them all to be good that it would be the good ones that would go to heaven, that they would stand on God’s right hand and those that were bad were lost, they would not go anywhere.”<sup>41</sup> Jack Wimenazek, in 1923, was quoted as saying: “Bini was not a medicine man he was like a priest. He knew like them the heavens.”<sup>42</sup>

In another narrative by Moses Sanaus, which is undated but probably recorded in the 1920s at Hazelton and interpreted by Constance Cox, Sanaus remarked: “I don’t know where Bini had seen a white man because he had not heard of such a thing. He got all his knowledge through his dreams and visions. The prophecies of Bini are followed among us now because we see that they are true . . . His prophecies were very much like those of clergymen.”<sup>43</sup>

The claim made by Moses Sanaus and Constance Cox that Bini “got all his knowledge through his dreams and visions,” knowledge that cannot be explained by empirical means, testifies to the power that they ascribed to dreams and visions. Bini’s visions were considered to be authentic and authoritative not because they came from a priest but because he dreamed them.

Dream and visions are features of many religions indigenous to the Americas and have been particularly well documented among the peoples of the Plains. Lee Irwin, in his insightful discussion of the Plains dream world remarks that “dreams and visions are

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38 Charles Martin, “Bini’s death, ascent to heaven and message for Indians,” B-F-322.1, MSS 2101, Marius Barbeau Northwest Coast Files, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

39 Isaac Tens, B-F-322.3, *ibid.*

40 Moses Sanaus, B-F-322.6, *ibid.*

41 Paul Dzius, B-F-322.7, *ibid.*

42 Jack Wimenazek, B-F-322.11, *ibid.*

43 Moses Sanaus, B-F-322.18, *ibid.*

a fundamental means for social and cultural transformation.”<sup>44</sup> Dreaming, it is implied, is a creative process, dreams and visions are a source of ingenuity and, Irwin continues, they are “essential to the healing and medicinal practices of all Plains peoples. It would be no exaggeration to say that the majority of healing techniques are received in visions and dreams.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, in a recent and more general discussion of the significance of prophecy and visions in the Indigenous North American setting, Irwin remarks that prophecy is “a deep seated epistemological willingness to open one’s ears, to hear the words and teaching offered in dreams and visions, in order to learn what may be useful or strategic in enhancing a Native way of life.”<sup>46</sup> I do not wish to dilute the complex dynamics involved in visionary practice, and I cite Irwin only to point generally to the role that visions play with respect to religious transformation and healing. A vision has the power to effect beneficial change within a community. According to Jenness, dreams among the Witsuwit’èn bestowed upon the dreamer the power to heal, procure game, and predict future events.<sup>47</sup> Dreams were seen as a source of knowledge from which the community could stand to benefit. Bini, as a dreamer, was concerned with his community, a community that, among other things, was in the process of defining a new or rumoured religion and anticipating the arrival of its representatives, the missionaries. Perhaps Bini was articulating these burgeoning relationships on his own terms, in order to define how he, the Witsuwit’èn, and neighbouring peoples ought to relate to them.

The narratives, at least as I read them, point to both his effort at articulating Christianity and his eventual success at the task. According to the Gitksan narrators, it was through Bini’s work that the Witsuwit’èn and Gitksan successfully articulated their relationship to Christianity. Perhaps from their perspective, Christianity was another source of power or knowledge like any other—it impressed itself on the world through dreams and visions. Christianity, in their view, like many new practices and technologies, was learned through dreams. Thus, the narrators spoke of Christianity as a local development,

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44 Irwin, *The Dream Seekers*, 189.

45 Ibid., 192.

46 Irwin, *Coming Down*, 9.

47 Jenness, *The Carrier Indians*, 541-543.

articulated by Bini the prophet for the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en in a traditional way. Religion, the narrators insist, is a local phenomenon; it is not exogenous. The Christian priests, the narrators suggest, were not the only individuals who had access to the power of the vision, the manner in which knowledge of religion, which now included Jesus Christ, was attained in the local idiom. Isaac Tens, cited earlier, states that Bini exclaimed: "I have also seen sesikru' . . . Seskiri said: –You tell your people to be all baptised and also to be all married in the proper way. And place sentinels over your village by day and by night to watch that all are good."<sup>48</sup> Tens adds that Bini had never heard of Seskiri before, but that "it was his own term." Whether Bini is referring to Jesus or the teachings of Jesus, Bini is the purveyor of the message, a message that he received, according to Tens, in "heaven."

If according to Jonathan Z. Smith "one of the fundamental building blocks of religion [is] its capacity for rationalization," then the effort to create new modes of significance and order in the face of change is a religious effort.<sup>49</sup> Bini drew attention to a changing and uncertain religious landscape and through that very process sought to resolve the uncertainties. Bini is remembered as successful because he articulated the arrival of Christianity in terms that valued the indigenesness of religion and that were consistent with an Indigenous understanding of the power and dynamics of the vision and the equal access that all human beings have to that power.

### *Conclusion*

While I agree with Johnson's perspective cited earlier that religious "claims emerge from the present for the purposes of the present," present concerns are also often concerns about the future. When worldviews converge, anticipation of the future—in so far as it facilitates the creation of new modes of order through raising awareness about uncertain and rumoured change—is partly the work of religion. In the case of Bini, the anticipation of Christianity entailed its articulation in the local religious idiom: the prophet tradition. This process of articulation, as reflected in the prophet tradition, seems

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48 Isaac Tens, B-F-322.3, MSS 2101, Marius Barbeau Northwest Coast Files, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

49 Smith, "The Bare Facts," 57.

also to resonate with Walter Burkert's observation that religion is "basically optimistic."<sup>50</sup> As activity that looks toward the future, prophetic activity, while inspired by the concerns and conditions of the present, anticipates novel events and crises that may arise in the time to come. The oral narratives on Bini, the Witsuwit'en prophet, show prophetic activity as both creative and proactive, and as a local form of agency orchestrating religious transformation.

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50 Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*, 33.

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