
Introduction

Whose Sacred Sites?

Indigenous Political Use of Sacred Sites, Mythology, and Religion

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Let me begin by talking just a little about the historical context of the present interest in indigenous sacred sites. I won't spend a great deal of time here and will make no big attempts to create a bibliography of references—most of what I am saying is well known to indigenous peoples and those who are interested in them. However, I think it is important that we establish at the onset the origin of the concept of "sacred sites" as we understand it today.

The Western world has a tremendous respect for what it terms "sacred sites." Within its own Judeo-Christian tradition, sacred sites include churches and cathedrals; locations such as the Wailing Wall, the Mount of Olives, and others where crucial religious events have been played out; and lesser sites where miracles of one sort or another have been purported to have taken place. Graveyards are frequently considered sacred sites, and reverence is often attached to the birthplace or home of a particularly "holy" writer, preacher, or exemplary personage. And, as the Western world has increasingly secularized, these same attitudes and respect have been transmitted to icons viewed as ideals within political and economic systems: the Lincoln Memorial, the World Trade Center, and others.

However, sacred sites of other peoples were almost universally seen as threatening and dangerous by the Western world during its early expansion. Spanish conquistadores, English pioneers, French priests, and Dutch merchants all sought to subdue and appropriate any and all sacred sites

they met in their travels as a means of spreading Christianity and anchoring their cultural hold on their “conquests.” It was not until the middle of the twentieth century, in the wake of the ultimate intolerance, the Holocaust, and deeply aware of its own guilt in having effectively done the same thing with indigenous peoples of both Africa and the Americas, that the Western world began to create a framework of respect for the sacred sites of other people.

As usual with the Western world, once the idea got going, there was no stopping it. The U.S.-based counterculture of the 1960s not only espoused an idealized and stereotyped vision of the Native American world but created a whole series of sacred sites around dimly understood remnants of cultural lore. Latin American countries, while still doing their best to absorb or eliminate their own indigenous peoples, moved to create revisionist histories in which the Spanish conquistadores were the villains and the noble Aztecs, Incas, and others were helpless victims who came from a far purer form of life. Sacred sites not already preempted by European religion now became symbols of awe among a generation of young people disillusioned with their own Judeo-Christian cultural background who were searching for relevance in other spiritual worldviews.

By the late twentieth century, this attitude shift had increasingly invaded the legal and political world. The last decade of the century was named “the Decade of Indigenous Peoples.” The International Labor Treaty of 1996 had an entire chapter dedicated to indigenous rights. Most American countries established legal structures to protect their indigenous peoples, and numerous laws and regulations were passed to protect sacred sites. Given this favorable legal and political climate, indigenous peoples worldwide began to organize and work to rebuild damage done during centuries of repression.

Much of this work was aimed at regaining land areas and specific cultural rights for access to resources. Some of it was purely political, and not all of this was positive. In many cases, Western pseudointellectuals actively moved in to preempt and try to direct processes to fit their idealized vision of “indigenoussness.” Especially in South America, big business interests moved to infiltrate and take over the “indigenous movements” for their own ends. Meanwhile, the temporary lifting of pressure on indigenous cultures allowed many groups to consolidate their positions and enter the twenty-first century in better shape than ever before.

Thus, by the first years of the twenty-first century, indigenous groups around the world had progressed dramatically in gaining a voice and in our ability to defend our rights. However, collectively, we were very aware that the mechanisms we were using had been created by the Western world and that for us to interact effectively we needed to understand

very clearly the Western concepts behind these mechanisms. At least at our level in the Ecuadorian Amazon, we quickly became aware that we were still dealing with a deck seriously stacked against us.

To understand our problem, let us look briefly at what indigenous culture is all about—for that matter, what any culture is all about. Culture can be defined as a particular group of people's relation to its physical, spiritual, and social environments. A quick and easy way to assess a culture's priorities is to look at the language—if culture is a people's relation to its physical, spiritual, and social environments, language is the description of that relationship. The minute we look at intact languages, we realize that even where social and spiritual manifestations of any culture seem to define that culture's existence, the relation with the physical environment remains key. Without our physical environment, our social and spiritual environments have no place to develop.

This has led to indigenous groups' tremendous emphasis, worldwide, on the importance of recovering territories. Here we are not talking about just hunting or fishing rights or payoffs for exploitation of resources: we are talking about the tremendous importance to our cultures of being able to regain control over our territories, if we are to continue to maintain our cultures.

We quickly became aware that this was extremely threatening to the Western world. An amusing moment for me was when I was talking with the principal of my children's school. He was from Michigan and in any circle would be understood as a sympathetic, idealistic, well-educated, and well-balanced member of the Western world. He would be the first to defend human rights and shares with many white Americans the burden of guilt for his culture's treatment of indigenous peoples in the nineteenth century.

However, some twist of the conversation brought up the subject of property in Michigan, and he suddenly became a different person. It appeared that a band of Native Americans, flush with money from casinos established on tribal lands, were aggressively going out to buy back their traditional lands. To the horror of my friend, they were going up to farms and knocking on doors and offering cash on the barrelhead for properties. I asked, mildly, where the problem was—if they were offering fair value, in cash, to farmers who wished to sell, wasn't that the proper American way to do business? But somehow, the potential resurgence of indigenous control over vast areas of Michigan farmlands was extremely threatening to him, and somehow very un-American.

The Western world's response to this threat is interesting in its complexity. One of the most common methodologies is to try to divert interest from real issues. In our case (that of the Cofán Nation of northwest

Amazonia), we have had a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) show up to try to help us “rescue” our religion. Where are your ceremonies? Why don’t you have shamans? What are your sacred feasts? Why don’t you dress the way people did a generation ago? The message is clear. If we can justify helping you to “regain” a redefined and nonthreatening “culture,” we will no longer have to deal with an uppity bunch of Indians who are gaining control of lands we want for our objectives.

Even the government has gotten into the act: “Let us help you develop musical groups, and please get together a dance troupe dressed in ‘traditional’ clothing. But please don’t talk to us about keeping your streams pure and your forests intact. We need your resources far too badly. Meanwhile, we will help you preserve your ‘heritage,’ just so long as you don’t keep us out of your lands.”

I think I can speak for most indigenous peoples when I say that our cultures are generally very pragmatic. We associate deeply with our physical, social, and spiritual environments, but the association is nothing if not practical. While we often express ourselves in deeply idealistic terms, the daily lives of our people are eminently down-to-earth. This is the way all humans have interacted with their environments since the beginning of time. This does not mean that the sacred does not exist for us. But it seldom mirrors the Western ideal.

It is within this context that we seek to understand the Western world’s concept of “sacred sites.” At least among my people, we have no temples, nor do we have centralized locations for “worship.” Our spiritual interaction with our environment is deeply interwoven with our physical interaction. Much of our spiritual expression is aimed at providing our people with purely physical benefits—safety, food, health, and an environment in which our social expression is maximized. For this, we need our lands above all. In a very real sense, our most sacred site is our land. But this doesn’t help us as we try to interface with an aggressive “Other” in the form of the Western world. So we need to muster every possible argument and every possible legality to be able to come to grips with this Other, and to do so means using the Western concepts—even when they are not accurate—to our advantage. This means using Western idealism, Western legal processes, Western mysticism, and Western preconceptions for our ultimate goal—that of recovering and gaining control of our territories.

In our specific case, this was the situation we faced as we came to understand the importance of sacred sites in the Western understanding of indigenous cultures. We have no word for sacred site. Our graveyards are places of sadness and distance; we look for convenience in burying our dead (soft earth), a place far enough away from living humans so that possible inimical spirits released by the death of a person of power will

not molest the living, and a place not easily visible so that memories will be eased and not awakened constantly. But sacred in the sense of being hallowed or something we wish to preserve at all costs?

No. The river is constantly changing course, our people move our villages, the forest or the river reclaim locations, and the future generations do not feel obliged to care for the sites of their ancestors in the face of natural processes. We watched with a little sadness, but more amusement, as the burial site of my village's chief, a noted shaman who died in the mid-1960s, was claimed by colonists and eventually became the site of a bar/dance hall. We figured if anything was left of his spirit tied to the spot, he probably thought it was great to have constant parties over his bones.

The same is true of other "important" sites. The huge rock stump of the Fish Tree, which figures deeply in our creation myth, was easily seen until a couple of generations ago, when the river it is located on began to change course. Now the stump is partially hidden under brush and alluvial rocks. It is a point of interest to the younger generation, but no special awe surrounds it. Our one active volcano in our territories has long been known as a site of power and has been frequented by generations of shamans seeking spiritual strength. However, no mass pilgrimages or prayerful attitudes accompany our knowledge. We recognize the mountain's power, both physical and spiritual, but no one was especially upset when the Ministry of Environment claimed it as part of a park. The list could go on. The bottom line is that humans are living beings moving through a changeable and dynamic series of environments, where the idea of trying to hold to a particular site in a special way is a luxury with little deep meaning.

However, as we became aware of Western reverence for sacred sites, we immediately recognized the potential for using this Western preconception to our advantage. Discussion within the communities began in the late 1980s and continues today, as people wrestle with the concept and its implications as we seek to protect our territories and, in a very real sense, create sacred sites.

I have mentioned graveyards. One of our first attempts at using Western concepts to recover our territorial rights was to stop a road, being built to access gravel, from crossing a quiet forest we had designated as an area for burials. If we had merely opposed the road on the grounds that the forest is a productive and necessary part of our lands, we would have been laughed at. However, when we presented it as a graveyard, the reaction was "Gosh, we're sorry ... thanks for telling us, we'll figure out a different route."

The Fish Tree stump and our tame volcano El Reventador were obvious fits, and both now are within Cofán-managed territories. Likewise, a re-

gion in the Cofán Bermejo Ecological Reserve remains important as an isolated area where true shamans can still seek power without the constant static from both outsiders and Cofáns who no longer follow the necessary taboos during power searches.

Given the power of the model, we then proceeded to invent sites—most notably the Falls of the Rio Coca. This huge and impressive falls has long been part of Cofán territory, and while no one especially worshipped it, it has certainly been the source of much comment and awe within the Cofán Nation. Thus it was no stretch to declare this a sacred site in spite of its lack of direct spiritual implications. In this, we were imitating the secular sacred sites that have become so common in post-Christian Western culture.

These are small examples of a phenomenon I have seen happening repeatedly within the indigenous world. I was recently with friends from a small Northwest tribe. They showed me the pit from which their first people came and mentioned the importance of their graveyards in their fight for territory. Another friend from the Great Plains area described the tremendous battle over sacred sites in the Black Hills. Yet another friend described the importance of a “sacred” waterfall and salt lick in the middle of Peru.

Thus, the figure of the sacred site has become an important political tool in the hand of modern indigenous activists as we seek to regain control over our territories. We are not lying when we call these sites sacred. But the meaning of sacred for us is very different than for the Western world. The bottom line for us is that all of our territory is sacred in the sense that it is deeply, powerfully imbued with spiritual reality. To take any particular location and call it more sacred makes little sense within a worldview in which our interactions are with all of our environments, and all are sacred. But if the singling out of particular locations will aid us in dealing with the Western world as we seek to maintain our culture, we can meet them halfway.

There are two final comments I would like to make concerning this.

One is that, as we work to fit into an ideal imposed upon us by the outside world, we create a new reality. While we of this generation recognize that much of how we present ourselves to the outside world is in response to its demands rather than our own realities, the younger generations will grow up in a world where Reventador is a seriously sacred location, where the Fish Tree stump is an important monument, and where our often tongue-in-cheek rhetoric defending the Coca Falls is truly the description of an age-old relationship. It is sad that this has to be. It has already happened in many corners of the indigenous world, and perhaps

it is revisionism at least as strong as the Latin American anticonquistador movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Finally, I would like to end with a small story. During the early 1990s, my small community of Cofán was able to recover control over more than 300,000 acres of forests, rivers, swamps, and hills. As chief of the community, I became deeply aware of my stewardship, not only of the people in my territory but of the trees, the animals, the water, the air—we were living in a harmony that included all that was there. However, it was not until one night several years later that the full implications of stewardship came home to me.

There is a small mythical creature in our forests called the *dusese* (doo-say-say). It reputedly looks like a very tiny human, perhaps a meter tall, and travels almost exclusively at night. Usually minding its own business, it is potentially dangerous to humans, and people stay inside and under the covers when one comes near a village. Its call is an ascending whistle, quite similar to our local species of the cuckoo but more intense and different. I say “mythical” advisedly, as there is little room in my Western-trained belief structure for the *dusese*. However, on this particular night, at about nine o’clock, a *dusese* began to call outside of our house. The feel, as it were, was totally different from the cuckoo, and the hair on the back of my neck crawled.

Then I realized that this creature was coming from upriver—where the oil company is working, where colonists are daily expanding their activities, where towns are being built, where the water is polluted by miners and oil production—and an enormous sympathy came over me, and I stood up, went to the window, and spoke, saying, “You are welcome to stay with us, for we, too, understand the need for this forest.” The next morning, other community members described the *dusese’s* travels—our farthest upriver households, some fifteen kilometers away from our central village, were the first to hear it, around 7:30. It had passed by each of our households in the area until it got to us, and by 9:30 had continued past our lowest household—no cuckoo would have moved so far or so fast.

Sacredness for us is about the complete environment—an environment rich in spirituality, in importance for our social lives, and for our physical survival. It is the Coca Falls, it is Reventador, it is the Fish Tree stump, it is our graveyards. But it is also the stewardship of rivers, trees, animals, and *duseses*. It is a world where we are part of a whole. To isolate any part and set it up as special may have its uses, but it is the whole that lends even those parts their sanctity, and without the whole, we become nothing more than isolated folk dancers disguised in garments that no longer fit.

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