Yakama Nation

The peoples now commonly called the Yakamas traditionally lived in much of what is now central and eastern Washington State. Under provisions of the Walla Walla Treaty of 1855, the tribes ceded over 10 million acres to the United States government, and what is called the Yakama Indian Reservation was created. The Yakamas, who now number nearly 9000 tribal members, actually comprise 14 different bands and tribes, sharing a Sahaptin linguistic base, and a similar social history involving a migratory hunter-gatherer existence.

The Yakama Reservation itself is the largest in the Pacific Northwest, comprising nearly 1.4 million acres, nearly half again as large as Rhode Island. It stretches from the summit of the Cascade Mountains east to the irrigated farmlands and native range lands of the Yakima Valley (the Yakamas changed their own name to reflect original spellings). The Reservation has significant natural resources, with extensive farming and grazing lands, proximity to both the Yakima and Columbia Rivers, and healthy stands of commercially viable timber, including both Ponderosa Pine and Douglas Fir.

This biological diversity and richness is connected to the present religious diversity of the Yaka, and how the various spiritual traditions view the environment. It is essential, however, to note that all three religious traditions – despite different theological orientations – have made room for a significant amount of agreement on the importance of environmental respect. This agreement often translates into a significant power base in deciding questions of environmental policy on the Reservation.

There are three major spiritual traditions on the Reservation: the traditional washat (sometimes called the Seven Drum Religion or Longhouse Religion), more traditional expressions of Christianity as brought by missionaries in the nineteenth century, and the Indian Shaker Faith. The washat was founded along the Columbia River by the “Dreamer Prophet” Smohalla in the mid-nineteenth century, and represents a native revitalization movement that combines certain religious elements from Western Christianity with native spirituality. At the outset the religion was adaman in its stand against agriculture and mining, believing such practices to be antithetical to the proper attitude toward the Creator and toward the Earth. Today, the faith no longer rejects these practices, but the washat still takes environmental respect as one of its cornerstones.

Its modern strongholds also reflect the environmental tenets of the religion, which mirror the Yakamas’ ties between Creator and nature. The modern washat is celebrated at a number of locations both on and off the reservation, including the traditional fishing villages of Priest Rapids and Rock Creek, both on the Columbia River. That the washat is celebrated along the banks of what was once the greatest salmon fishery in the world is no accident. This connection between religion and geography emphasizes the fact that the washat celebrates the salmon as one of the Creator’s principal gifts to his people.

Much of traditional Yakama mythology centers on the Columbia River and the salmon, and often spotlights “Spil-yay” the trickster (portrayed by the coyote) acting on the people’s behalf. In the Yakama story “Spil-yay Breaks the Dam,” Coyote acts to save his people when the greedy Swallow Sisters dam the Columbia, preventing the salmon from reaching the traditional fishing sites. In “Legend of the Lost Salmon,” even Coyote is ineffectual in reviving the salmon when the people disregard the Creator’s rules about the proper way to fish. Only through the miraculous intervention of an elder are the salmon restored, reminding the people that greed and disrespect for the Creator have no place in their lives. Such stories are an essential part of the washat heritage, and reflect the intense love and respect for the environment that is at the heart of the religion.

The washat enjoys certain cultural and historical advantages due to its being interwoven into the very fabric of traditional native social life, and its beliefs on nature are disseminated far more often than at formal times of worship. For example, at times of crisis such as the death of the tribal member, Yakama storytellers are still retained to relate traditional stories about nature’s creatures, the connections between worship toward the Creator and tribal morality, and sacred places on the reservation. The stories function both as explanation for cultural and tribal morality, and distraction for the grieving family. Thus, the recent surge in the washat’s popularity among the Yakamas has been accompanied by an increased focus on encouraging traditional ways of looking at social structures.

There are also Yakamas who worship in traditional Christian denominations, represented in mainline and Pentecostal churches. These churches are mostly situated in the most populated areas of the reservation, from the middle Yakima Valley northwest to the border of the Reservation at the city of Yakima itself.

Most Yakamas who attend traditional Christian services...
do so at churches started fairly recently, and aimed specifically at reaching native populations. Some, however, attend churches started by missionaries during the nineteenth century, during the days of federal policy that gave priority to one religious group for each reservation.

For the Yakama Reservation, the Methodist-Episcopal denomination was selected by the administration of President Ulysses Grant as the religion that would be responsible for the “moral and spiritual education” of the Yakamas, and in the formative years of the Reservation, Methodism’s popularity was boosted by this governmental sponsorship. During this time period, Methodism’s opposition to traditional native spirituality — especially toward Smohalla and the washats — was personified in the person of James Harvey Wilbur, Indian Agent from 1864–1882. Wilbur did everything in his power to defeat the washats’ influence, believing that traditional native religious views toward nature were the single biggest barrier to “Indian civilization,” and his promotion of native agriculture was second to none in the entire Indian service of that time.

Today, Christian churches on the reservation do not attempt to change traditional Yakama attitudes and beliefs toward the environment, preferring to focus more on evangelism. To be sure, since traditional Yakama spirituality knows little or no separation between theology and morality, and since many of the traditional spiritual beliefs contain animistic elements that are more directly confrontational with traditional Christianity, some conflict is unavoidable. Nonetheless, the Christian churches’ otherworldly focus results in many Yakama worshippers retaining traditional views toward nature, at least in part. Thus, Yakamas who consider themselves as Christians are free to side with washats and attendants on environmental issues — despite a different spiritual orientation.

The Shaker religion in the Pacific Northwest was founded by John Slocum near Olympia, Washington, in the late 1800s, and represents a third religious option on the Yakama Reservation. Shaker beliefs have always been centered more on individual piety and morality, rather than the rejection of any particular culture’s practices (e.g., agriculture), and the churches’ present location reflects this concern. The three Indian Shaker Churches are located not at traditional villages (as is often the case with the washats), nor close to populations centers (like more traditional Christian churches), but in the heart of the Reservation’s prime agricultural lands. Historically, many Yakama Shakers have been employed in the agriculture industry, and Shaker teachings have never equated modern technology with impropriety.

The religion itself combines ritualistic elements from both Protestantism and Catholicism, and considers itself a type of Christianity reserved for Native Americans. The Shaker faith does not focus on extensive doctrinal subtleties, however, and hence there is a great deal of latitude amongst individual worshippers on beliefs considered tangential to individual holiness. Thus, many believers have not rejected the traditional Yakama views on nature, and, on many key issues such as water rights or salmon restocking, both washats and Shakers often present a united front.

Thus, despite three very different religious traditions amongst the Yakamas today, there is a growing voice on the need to respect the environment — a voice not lost by the very real religious diversity on the reservation. Certainly not rejecting agriculture or logging, but insisting on wisdom as a foundational value for environmental policy, this voice serves in many ways as a counter-voice to the surrounding voice of the majority culture. To cite just one example, despite the mostly dismal picture on the state of the northwest salmon, the Yakamas have been at the forefront of an intense program of stream revitalization and salmon stocking, and there have been a number of local successes in terms of fish returns. Thus, when focusing on the connections between religion and nature, the Yakama Nation is serving as an important example to other native peoples. Large in size, rich in resources, the Yakama Reservation and its peoples have demonstrated that religious diversity need not be a barrier to environmental progress.

Michael McKenzie

Further Reading


See also: Columbia River Watershed Pastoral Letter; Washat Religion (Drummer-Dreamer Faith).
Yamuna

The Yamuna is a river that flows from its source of Yamunotri high in the central Himalayas for about 826 miles to its confluence with the Ganges on the plains at Allahabad. It has long been considered one of the holiest rivers of northern India, and for centuries has been worshipped as an aquatic goddess. Today, however, much of the river has become polluted, causing a variety of responses from the religious community that is associated with the worship of the Yamuna.

The Yamuna originates from the Yamunotri glacier at an elevation near 20,000 feet above sea level. This glacier is nestled on a steep slope just below the crest of Mount Kalinda, located about six miles west of the Bandarpunch peak (20,735 feet), the dominant mountain in the central Himalayan region of Garhwal that divides the watershed of the Yamuna and Ganges. The Yamuna rushes out of the morainic snout of the glacier to fill the pond Saptarishikund, named after seven sages who called the river down from heaven for the benefit of Earth, and from here cascades down the southern face of Mount Kalinda. Accordingly, the Yamuna is also called “Kalindi.” The cold water stream drops into a canyon where it joins the other recognized source of the Yamuna: a hot spring that flows from a stone wall of the canyon. Here, at an elevation of about 10,500 feet, is located the Yamunotri complex, an important temple site and destination of a popular pilgrimage. Pilgrims have been coming to this site for centuries to worship Yamuna and seek her blessings.

Yamuna is depicted at her Himalayan source in her Puranic form as a goddess having a dark complexion, clothed in red garments, holding in her hand a pot filled with good fortune, and sitting on the back of a turtle. Because the goddess Yamuna brings life-giving water from the mountains, and is associated with the creative powers that animate all life, she is often addressed as “Mother.” Yamuna is considered to be the sister of the goddess Ganges, who sits by her side in the Yamunotri temple. Yamuna is also considered to be the daughter of Surya, god of the sun, and the twin sister of Yama, the god of death, and as such the priests who attend the Yamunotri pilgrimage complex regard her as an auspicious goddess who blesses the lives of her pilgrims and protects them from death. Pilgrims visiting the Yamunotri complex cook food in the hot spring’s boiling water, which is considered to be a gift of the sun to his daughter, and bathe in a tank filled with its hot water to be blessed, purified, and freed from sins.

The Yamuna descends rapidly from the Yamunotri pilgrimage complex to carve a valley through the beautiful Garhwalli Mountains before forcing its way through the Shivalik foothills and emerging onto the Indo-gangetic plains at the town of Dakpathar. Here where the Yamuna leaves the wild mountains and enters the “civilized” plains a great change takes place: Dakpathar marks a transition from the natural to the industrial, from river worship to river management, and from the Yamuna as a majestically unimpeded river to Yamuna as a greatly reduced stream, for here a huge barrage (a dam-like structure comprised of a long series of gates that regulate water flow for irrigation and hydro-electric power) has been built across the entire river and the great majority of the water is removed from the riverbed to be channeled off into utility canals. A little further downstream, the Yamuna reaches Tajewala, site of another massive barrage that blocks the river for irrigation and channels its water into the Western and Eastern Canals. The Yamuna then flows through the industrial towns of Yamunanagar, Karnal, Panipat, and Sonepat before arriving in the huge metropolis of Delhi, capital of the modern nation of India. Only 10 percent of the volume of water leaving the mountains reaches Delhi; almost all of the water remaining in the riverbed is extracted for domestic and commercial use in the capital city, which has borne the major weight of the rapid development that has occurred in India since the late 1980s. Although Delhi was built on the bank of the Yamuna long ago because of the river’s bounty and beauty, today the city dumps millions of gallons of untreated sewage and industrial effluents into the Yamuna, making the stretch of the river downstream one of the most polluted in India.

What remains of the Yamuna, after Delhi, flows past the ornate temples and magnificent sandstone bathing platforms of the pilgrimage centers of Vrindaban, Mathura, and Gokul in Braj, the important cultural region associated with the Hindu god of love, Krishna. This is also the area in which Yamuna is most celebrated as a goddess and her theology has been most fully developed, for here she is regarded as a goddess of supreme love. Consequently, there are more temples dedicated to Yamuna in this region than anywhere else along her course. Much of the theological tradition associated with Yamuna is the lasting result of a cultural efflorescence that took place in this region in the sixteenth century.

Although the river is becoming increasingly polluted, religious practices directed to Yamuna are still common: her devotees bathe in her daily, they sip her water reverently, make special offerings to her liquid form, and honor her presence in the many temples of Braj. Her water is also an essential ingredient in many of the temple rituals conducted in this region. For her Braj devotees, Yamuna is a goddess of exquisite love and compassion who initiates souls into the divine love affair. Among the pantheon of Hindu goddesses it would be difficult to find one more representative of divine love than Yamuna. In Braj, she is considered to be a chief lover of the youthful god Krishna. So great is her eagerness to join Krishna that, rather than being pictured on the back of a slow turtle, Yamuna is portrayed in this region running to offer her beloved a flower garland. Moreover, she experiences the deepest of...
all loves, and yet rather than selfishly holding onto the joy of that love for herself, she shares its life-enhancing bliss with all who approach her with an open heart. The theme of Yamuna’s loving generosity is thus fundamental to her theology in Braj.

The Yamuna leaves the pilgrimage towns of Braj and winds her way through dry arroyos to reach Agra, site of the celebrated Taj Mahal that stands on a high bank overlooking the river. Downstream the Yamuna is joined by some important tributaries, most significantly the Chambal River, which drains the eastern slopes of the Aravalli Mountain range in southeastern Rajasthan. After receiving fresh water from these tributaries, the Yamuna is somewhat restored. By the time the Yamuna arrives at the confluence with her sister the Ganges at Allahabad she is clearly the bigger of the two rivers. The confluence of these riverine sisters offers a remarkable sight: water from the Yamuna is deep blue in color, whereas water from the Ganges is chalky white; the two meet to form a wide expanse of water that is divided by a clearly distinguishable line.

This is site of the famous Kumba Mela, the largest religious gathering of human beings on the planet, and another favorite bathing spot for the many pilgrims who come here for a life-blessing “holy dip.” Although the Yamuna nominally ends at Allahabad, devotees of this river insist that the resulting confluence is “Ganges in name, but Yamuna in form.” Since about two-thirds of the water flowing past the confluence comes from the Yamuna riverbed, the “Ganges River” that flows past the holy city of Benares and empties into the Bay of Bengal is to a large degree the Yamuna.

Religious responses to the increasing environmental degradation of the river move in two different directions: religious practices are declining as a result of the pollution, and religious sentiment is being marshaled to check the contamination. Although religious beliefs and practices related to the Yamuna are still common, they are being weakened by the declining health of the river. For example, many people who used to bathe regularly in the river for religious purposes are no longer doing so, and Yamuna water is no longer being used in many of the temple rituals in Braj. People are beginning to recognize that the life-giving river goddess is “sick”; some of her devotees even suggest that Yamuna is “dying.” Clearly the pollution of the river has a great impact not only on the physical health of the people who inhabit her banks, but also on the religious culture that has thrived along her course for centuries.

Devotees of Yamuna are not only lamenting her declining health; some are taking direct action to save her. Although the Indian government has attempted to remedy some of the problems of Yamuna pollution through the Yamuna Action Plan inaugurated in 1993, most of the inspiration for cleaning the river has come from the religious community. In the past, “loving service” (seva) to Yamuna typically has been expressed through a variety of acts of worship; today the idea is emerging that the proper form of loving service is environmental activism. Motivated by a deep love for the goddess Yamuna, some of her devotees have initiated political demonstrations and environmental education programs, and have taken polluters and the government to court in an effort to halt the pollution of the river. Their actions provide instructive examples of how religious sentiment has been enlisted to save rivers, and how river worshippers express their devotion through environmental activism.

David L. Haberman

See also: Hinduism; India; Mammy Water; Water in Islam; Water in Zoroastrianism; Water Spirits and Indigenous Ecological Management (South Africa).

Yanomami

The Yanomami are indigenes who live on either side of the border between northern Brazil and southern Venezuela in the Amazon rainforest near rivers in the lowlands and streams in the Guyana Highlands. Some 20,000 Yanomami reside in up to three hundred or more separate communities, which range in size from a few dozen to a hundred or more individuals. Their subsistence economy is characterized by a sustainable rotational system of bow-and-arrow hunting, fishing, gathering, and swidden farming. This economy is associated with low population density and high mobility. Sub-groups or a whole community forage from camps in the forest, on treks of days to months in duration, several times a year. Thus, Yanomami interact daily in intimate ways with each other and their natural habitat.

The Yanomami do not rigidly distinguish between the natural and supernatural realms. Religion permeates their daily life, society, culture, and ecology. Their variety of animism or nature religion focuses on numerous and diverse spiritual beings which inhabit the forests, streams, mountains, and other physical features in their habitat. Some of these spirits are contacted and manipulated by shamans, part-time ritual specialists. Several men in each community may practice shamanism. One or more shamans dramatically chant and dance ritually almost every afternoon or evening in the communal house, frequently combining their complementary powers as a team. A shaman usually employs a hallucinogenic snuff powder developed from psychoactive plants to contact helper spirits. Through spirit possession the shaman helps fellow villagers cope with practical problems like fostering success in hunting, avoiding danger in the forest, healing the sick, and taking revenge on enemies in other villages. If,
for example, an individual’s spirit counterpart or alter-ego which dwells in the forest is lost, then the person becomes sick and may even die. A shaman can find and restore this spirit for the individual. Shamans are the most highly respected individuals in society and the reputation of exceptional ones extends to distant villages.

Yanomami may also employ a wide variety of numerous plants for medicinal purposes. However, their religion, including the associated oral literature, focuses overwhelmingly on animal spirits. Indeed, the Yanomami believe that humans and animals may be transformed into one another. A shaman, for example, may not only imitate the behavior of an animal like a jaguar when possessed by its spirit, but even be physically transformed into the animal and roam the forest.

Up to a year or more is required for an apprentice to learn the mysteries, ritual chants, dances, and practices of shamanism. The apprentice is supposed to abstain from sex, certain foods, and various kinds of hunting and other activities. There are food taboos for menstruating, pregnant, and lactating women as well. Fathers of new babies must also follow certain food prohibitions. Such taboos, in conjunction with a multitude of various other practices like regular trekking, reduce the environmental impact of the Yanomami and usually allow the normal regeneration of nature.

Yanomami interact with animals in their habitat on a daily basis both physically and spiritually. Ornamental body-paint designs usually symbolize animals and certain ones are believed to protect an individual from dangers like poisonous snakes. Even personal names, which are essentially considered sacred as well as private, are usually those of animals. Every Yanomami has an animal spirit counterpart in the forest. Accordingly, the hunter cannot kill members of that species without potentially endangering himself.

When an individual dies, his or her soul travels to a paradise above Earth. However, if the corpse is not treated with proper mourning, respect, and ritual by relatives, then the deceased’s spirit may return to the village and cause harm. Also after death, the spirits who reside in an individual’s body become spirits or animals in the forest. A wild animal that strangely appears in a village may be interpreted as a bad omen or evil spirit.

Reciprocity is the pivotal principle that underlies the worldview, attitudes, values, and behavior of the Yanomami. The natural, social, and spiritual components of the Yanomami world influence each other in many different ways. The unity, interconnectedness, and interdependence of all life from the perspective of Yanomami philosophy and religion permeates their rich oral literature as well.

While Yanomami religion has yet to be thoroughly studied, let alone its ecological meaning and significance, it is quite probable that their worldview tends to promote respect and reverence for nature in general. Whether in natural or social relations, harmony prevails on a daily basis in Yanomami life, in spite of occasional eruptions of disharmony. Part of the role of the shaman is to monitor and adjust these relations.

The survival and welfare as well as harmony of the Yanomami are, however, increasingly threatened by the encroachment of external forces. Most devastating have been introduced Western diseases, which often become raging epidemics, especially in areas where alien wildcat goldminers have intruded into Yanomami territory. In the matter of religion, Christian missionaries have had only nominal success in converting Yanomami, even though they have worked in several areas since the 1950s. Consequently, missionaries have precipitated relatively little disruption of traditional shamanistic animism which remains a vital part of Yanomami life. However, missionaries have introduced substantial changes in other aspects of Yanomami culture which could eventually impact on their traditional religion and ecology as well. At the same time, missionaries usually provide regular and long-term medical, educational, and other types of sorely needed assistance, given the dismal failure of state governments to fulfill its responsibilities to all citizens in Brazil and Venezuela. The Yanomami, including their spiritual ecology, will continue to face many serious challenges in the future.

Leslie E. Sponsel

Further Reading
See also: Amazonia; Ayahuasca; Cosmology; Enteogens; Ethnobotany; Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo – and Ethnobotany in Colombia; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Shamanism (various).
Yoeme (Yaqui) Ritual

The Rio Yaqui is the northernmost of five Mexican rivers that drain the mountains of what was once called New Spain and which is now called the state of Sonora. Sitting within this land, alongside the Yaqui River, are the Yoeme Pueblos, often referred to as the original Eight Pueblos. (The term “original” marks a distinction between these communities in Sonora and those created much later on the other side of the U.S.–Mexico border.) Within these villages live the Yoeme Indians, often called the Yaquis. Based on the direct translation “Yoeme” = “People,” and joining a recent cross-tribal move to reference tribes by names in their respective languages, I retain the use of “Yaqui/s” in the contexts of proper place-names, previously published quotes, and titles, while using “Yoeme/m” within the following descriptions.

Yoeme oral tradition places their homeland in northwest Mexico long before European contact and sometime earlier than human existence as we know it today. Any research into aboriginal Yoeme lifeways will undoubtedly lead to the world of the Surem, small proto-Yoeme who lived in complete unity with their environment. These ancestors of the Yoemem are said to have communicated telepathically with all living beings and were the original inhabitants of the hiakim, or Yoeme homeland. Oral histories of this primary era recount the presence of a tree that was making an unintelligible humming sound. After much confusion, a young woman was able to translate the tree’s prophecies that a group of people were coming over the ocean from the west and that some of them would try to take the land, and others would bring new technologies, baptism, and subsequently a whole new way of living. The prophecy leads to some of the Surem leaving to the hills and the ocean, to remain enchanted beings. The other half of the Surem decided to stay in the hiakim, Yoeme “homeland,” preparing to fight the Conquistadors and welcome the Jesuits. According to some Yoeme historians, the Konkista (the real “conquest”) took place as the people responded in factions to the prophecy, before the Europeans ever arrived.

Having defeated Spanish armies three times between 1533 and 1609, Yoemem were to invite two Jesuit missionaries to their pueblos in 1617, while simultaneously keeping the Spanish conquistadors at bay. Military strength provided Yoeme control over their own combining of pre-contact traditions and Catholicism. We are immediately faced, therefore, with a different colonial situation than that confronted by most Native Americans and many indigenous peoples elsewhere. Yoemem powerfully enforced and strategically maintained their territorial and cultural boundaries, allowing for self-management from pre-Columbian time up through Jesuit collaboration. Thus, the Yoeme clearly cannot be quickly included within popular scholarly imaginings of “The” indigenous colonial experience. Primarily, in contrast to forced “conversions,” we know from both Yoeme and Spanish sources that the Yoeme invited the Jesuits into their territory. Both Jesuit documents and Yoeme oral traditions record that the Yoemem were eager to learn new approaches to civil planning, including farming and ranching. According to the primary Yoeme myth, The Singing Tree, the people had already received prophetic knowledge that such changes were coming.

The Singing Tree, many Yoemem claim, also prophesied that outsiders to the tribe would seek to push Yoemem off their homeland. The relationship between history and myth is nowhere more important than in these issues of boundary maintenance. In the early nineteenth century, approximately fifty years after Spain expelled the Jesuits, the emerging Mexican administrators began instituting an encomienda system of land tenure which slowly and steadily led to the more familiar colonial relations we see across the globe between indigenous peoples and colonizers. Throughout most of the next century, Yoeme people were deported, massacred, and driven off their homelands. Perhaps the crux of this disregard for Yoeme sovereignty came in the early twentieth century, when Angostura Dam was being built to direct water to larger Mexican cities and away from the original Eight Pueblos. The remaining half of the twentieth century framed Yoemem rebuilding villages, reinvigorating religious societies, and developing ways to regain control of their Aboriginal homeland. The control of land and the continuation of indigenous identity are co-dependent for most Yoemem.

One movement toward environmental sovereignty includes working with Mexican banking institutions to develop credit relations using the land as collateral. However, a widespread concern among the Yoeme is that the land has become a means of exchange with the banks. In order to support themselves and accumulate collective wealth for such things as education programs and ceremonial performances, Yoemem in the Rio Yaqui are repeatedly forced to borrow money to work their own land, the profits of which are distributed so thinly that they are in constant debt. Essentially, they are working their own land, but only earning enough for the most basic level of sustenance, always in fear of losing that land to the banks. Another option some community members want to explore includes selling land outright to the banks or non-Yoeme individuals, thereby avoiding the long process of slow debt accumulation and possible loss of land. Either of these two maneuvers put the tribe in a disadvantageous position: living in debt, or selling their tribal inheritance. So although Mexican President Lazaro Cárdenas in 1937 decreed a Zona Yaqui, members of the Eight Pueblos still struggle for complete control over their hiakim. Understandably, the struggle is fueled by a collective sense of belonging to a native community and is secured by a landscape and religious tradition that
reaches beyond the times of Spaniards and Jesuit missionaries.

Still, most of the ethnographers of Yoeme culture have struggled to make sense of Yoeme religious identity since the cultural performances suggest that they converted; and most Yoemem themselves claim to be Catholics. For example, almost every village performs a season-length passion play of the life of Jesus (a man who walked through the hiakim) while simultaneously bringing to life masked beings, deer dancers, and their related dimensions. But scholars have previously been looking for pre-conceived categories of sacred or profane, Christian or pagan, ritual or art, pre- or post-contact; all of which fail to characterize Yoeme notions of religious action. Thus, some of the most well-versed ethnographers of Yoeme culture understood the deer dance as a folk art left over from a pre-Christian culture (Painter 1986: 237; Spicer 1984: 289–99). How do we make sense of rituals that clearly signify a previous mode of sustenance when those relationships with “nature” are no longer available or feasible?

As of recently, very few Yoemem continue to hunt deer in the Eight Pueblos. Yet, few scholars have been attentive to the ways that Yoeme rituals utilize Christian symbols or characters within an indigenous logic, a conceptual framework that is inseparable from the geography, landscape and dimensionality that many might call “nature.”

Many Yoemem understand their world as dimensionally composed of overlapping, yet distinct worlds or realms, called “ania.” The literature suggests as many as nine different ania: tenku ania: a dream world, tuka ania: night world, huya ania: wilderness world, yo ania: enchanted world, nac ania: corn cob world, hean, hell, purgatory, and sea ania: flower world. Each of these worlds provides a home for powerful beings or forces, and Yoeme relate deer dancing with three specifically, since the deer emerges from an enchanted home, yo ania, into the wilderness world, huya ania, and dances for us in the flower world, sea ania. Understanding the importance of the sea ania in Yoeme religion is fundamental, since flowers, seewam, are the actualization of sacrifice and the nurturing acts of giving. The most nurturing aspects of nature are found in the sea ania: streams, lakes, clouds, rain. The deer lives in the sea ania and when he is killed, he is laid atop a bed of flowers. Hunters must have sea taka, or flower power, to hunt deer successfully. Flowers adorn the deer dancer’s antlers and skirt, as well as the necklaces and hair of the pahk’o’olam. In their extensive study of deer songs, Larry Evers and Felipe Molina write that the most common words found in the songs are Yoeme terms for flowers. For Molina, a well-respected scholar and Deer Singer, the main purpose of the songs is to bring Deer’s voice from the sea ania to the ceremony. He adds that, “almost every piece of regalia and every instrument used in deer dancing and deer singing may be called ‘seewa’ or ‘sea’ as well” (Evers and Molina 1987: 52).

The deer dance always entails the dancing of the pahk’o’olam (fiestero). Wearing black masks in either the shape of a humanoid face or of a goat’s head, pahko’olam lead the deer dancer into the performance area where he will spend the evening dancing with him, the two clowning around with each other, and entertaining the guests. When not dancing with the deer, pahko’olam wear their masks backwards or hang them from the left side of the head, since the devil is said to come from the left. Common mask designs include the elongated goat-face style with ears and horns. Small insects or desert animals are often painted on the masks. Typical Yoeme pahko’olam masks feature a band of small triangles pointing inward around the outside circumference, considered to be goat’s teeth, sun rays, or mountains. Additionally, many masks have cross-like paintings which some relate to Christianity, although I have also heard in various conversations that this was a pre-contact, sand-painting symbol for the sun. Both the elongated and face-shaped masks have horse hair dangling over the eyes and from the chin. There is a strong connection in the ethnographic literature between pahko’olam, goats and the yo ania. Their pre-colonial beginnings are referenced by their often used title, “old men of the fiesta.” Since they also are sometimes called “sons of the devil,” we should again be conscious of the tendency to relate the yo ania to concepts of evil and the devil. When attending an all-night pahko, the banter and antics of the pahko’olam help elevate the moods and energy of the crowd. The dancers are charged with passing out cigarettes to the audience members and more often than not create quite a stir by attempting to humiliate the deer dancer, musicians, the female societies to their right, and even the spectators.

Undoubtedly, the most well-known and most often described Yoeme rituals are those within the ceremonial season associated with Lent. From January 3rd to May 5th, the pueblos are governed by the religious society authorities. During these months, the atmosphere changes as both indigenous and Christian dimensions come together in a fantastic spectacle on Easter Saturday. On the morning of Holy Saturday, the Fariseos (parishioners, religious soldier group) and masked beings use a series of procession formations and building and staccato rhythms to rush the church repeatedly. As protectors of the church and the saints inside, anhelitom (“our angels,” children dressed as beautiful angels) whip these “evil” aggressors with willow twigs and chase them out of the church. After the last assault, the black curtain – which had dissected the front quarter from the rest of the church – is thrown wide open to reveal all the anhelitom and saints. Christ has risen, the tomb is empty, and the anhelitom chase the defeated aggressors out of the church for the last time. The ceremonial society of Mary, the matachinis, play their music and dance flowers for her, holding flower wands and wearing flower hats. First in the church and then mov-
ing outside the front doors, the pahko’olam dance around the flower patio. Simultaneously, the deer dancer is bringing his cosmic dimension, the sea ania, into presence. The sea ania, or flower world, is another realm of the Yoeme cosmos where the deer live, often conceived as under the dawn, and wherever the huya ania (wilderness world) opens up into the blossoms of complete being. Thus, through this ritual sacrifice the various Yoeme dimensions coexist: the pueblo, the church, the huya ania, the sea ania, and since these latter two are pre-Christian derivatives, they also signify the enchanted world of Yoeme ancestry, the yo ania. Here at the place where these worlds come together, the onlookers throw confetti flowers at the attacking soldiers (Fariseos). For what seems like hours, the community is showered by multicolored flowers drifting on the wind and upon a sea of swirling being. After the whole community defeats evil, fireworks shoot into the sky, heralding Saint Michael’s return to heaven since he has collected everyone’s sacrifice in the form of the flower. Everyone who has come and given of themselves during the previous season (performers, family members, observers) are considered to be sharing in this flower, this grace that originates not from God on high but through collective sacrifice.

As other contributors have noted in this volume, the word “nature” has no direct translation in Yoeme; nor can we directly translate “religion.” I quickly learned in my work in Yoeme villages that to talk about religion, I would use the word “kohtumbre” (a Spanish loan word for “custom” but used also for “society”), which most closely approximates the idea of religion. To ethnographically unpack the concept of “nature” entails the discussion of all seven or eight aniams, or possible states of being, which roughly relate to geographical/cosmological spaces. Perhaps the best term to draw all this material together is lutu’uria, which translates as “truth” but entails a socially performative component, a sharing of ritual knowledge. Thus, references to the aniams, as well as experiential knowledge of cultural traditions and religious practices, are expressed in performances that socially assert and test truth claims. These dances and speeches are religious obligations and ways of representing core aspects of Yoeme identity. Thus, lutu’uria provides a means by which Yoemem share their sense of the “real” world, namely, “nature.”

David Shorter

Further Reading


See also: Castaneda, Carlos; Radical Environmentalism (and adjacent, Rodney Coronado and the Animal Liberation Front).

Yoga and Ecology

The Yoga tradition originated several thousand years ago in India. Early evidence of Yoga practice can be found in Indus Valley seals unearthed in Mohenjodaro and other cities that date from 3500 B.C.E. Textual references to Yoga appear in the middle Upanisads and the Mahabharata, dating from about 600 B.C.E. The Buddha and the Jina (ca. 500 B.C.E.) both taught yogic styles of meditation. By around 200, Patanjali summarized Yoga practices in a classic text known as the Yoga Sutra. Sanskrit texts such as the Yogavasistha (ca. 1000) and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika (ca. 1500) describe various forms of Vedantic and esoteric Yoga. Haribhadra’s Yogadrstisamuccya (ca. 750) and Hemacandra’s Yogastra (ca. 1250) discuss the adaptation of the tradition to the Jaina faith, while the later texts of Kabir and Guru Nanak allude to Yoga meditation from universalist and Sikh perspectives. Yoga continues to be practiced throughout India and has become increasingly popular worldwide.

In its various manifestations, Yoga includes practices and philosophical positions that accord with values espoused by modern ecologists. Unlike many other schools of thought in India, Yoga is thoroughly realistic. It builds upon the Samkhya school of philosophy, first espoused by a near-mythical sage named Kapila who perhaps lived in northeastern India around 900 B.C.E. Kapila’s teachings were later systematized by a philosopher known as Isvarakrishna, who composed the Samkhya Karika in the early centuries of the Common Era. In this seminal text, the author exerts great care to articulate the existence and importance of the natural world. He posits that the world
is known to us through its effects, and the effects stem from a common cause, *prakriti*, a term that many scholars choose to translated as “nature.” Nature provides experience and liberation for her silent observer, the spiritual consciousness or *purusa*. According to the *Samkhya Karika*, all things exist for the purpose of serving and liberating this consciousness. Through understanding the nature of the creative force known as nature, one advances toward a state of freedom. To understand the structures and purposes of things one is able to cultivate a state of nonattachment that, from the perspective of this philosophy, entails a state of appreciation and respect, not disdain and abnegation for nature.

The earliest depictions of Yoga, found on sculptures that date from 5500 years ago, show persons imitating various aspects of the animal domain. An early statue from Mohenjodaro shows a man with his jaw wide open and his eyes bulging, approximating the roar of a lion. This pose later earns the name of *simhasana*, lion’s pose. A tableau first found in Indus Valley steatite seals and then repeated thousands of years later etched into the pillars of countless temples, shows a meditating deity, now known as Pasupati or Lord of the Animals. This imposing figure sits cross-legged and austere, surrounded by devoted and attentive animals such as goats, cattle, and what today seem to be make-believe creatures. This genre of representation exudes a sense of being in harmony and perhaps communion with the animal realm, and convey a sense of comfort in the company of nonhuman realities.

In the middle, Upanisadic period of Yoga, we find speculative discourses and dialogues about the nature and function of the human body and mind. By reflecting on the functions of the body, particularly the breath, and by seeking to still the mind, the Upanisads state that one can establish a connection with one’s inner self or Atman, often translated as soul. Passages from the early Upanisads such as the *Chandogya* and *Brhadaranyak* *Upanisads* emphasize the primacy of breath and the relationship between the microphase and the macrophase aspects of reality. By getting to know oneself through focusing on the power of the breath, one feels an intimacy with the larger aspects of the Earth and heavens, perhaps most aptly conveyed in the first section of the *Brhadaranyak Upanisad*, which first correlates the various functions and regions of the universe with the cosmic horse, and then makes a similar series of correspondences with the human body. By understanding one’s desires and impulses, as well as the structures and functions of one’s body and mind, one gains an understanding of the cosmos.

The later Upanisads and the Bhagavadgita speak directly of Yoga as the technique to be utilized in order to feel that intimate connection with the flow of life and one’s place within reality. The *Svetasvatara* and *Maitri Upanisads* state that by drawing the senses inward and controlling the breath, one can reach a state of equipoise. The Bhagavadgita comes to describe the Yogi as one who comprehends the relationship between the “field” or nature (*prakriti*) and the “knower of the field” or spirit (*purusa*). Within the body of Krishna, the entire world, in its splendor and terror, can be seen, appreciated, and embraced. The metaphor of the human body becomes extended in the *Gita* to include all aspects of the universe.

The *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali outlines an eightfold practice to ascend toward the state of self-realization through which one realizes one’s connection with the universe. The underlying philosophy of Yoga places great value on feeling the connection between one’s self and the larger world of nature. This continuity becomes celebrated in the term *samadhi*, the goal of Yoga, which describes an experience of non-difference between oneself, one’s sensory and mental processes, and the world. As described by Patanjali, the practitioner of Yoga becomes like a clear jewel, with “unity among grasper, grasping, and grasped” (*Yoga Sutra* I: 41). This state of consciousness allows one to melt into one’s surrounding and in the process diminish and eventually reverse past tendencies (*samskara*) bringing one to a state of clarity and immediacy.

The eight practices identified by Patanjali can be seen in light of environmental ethics. The beginning stage of Yoga includes five ethical practices (*yama*), held in common with the Jain tradition. First and foremost, Patanjali discusses nonviolence (*ahimsa*), which entails not harming any living being by thought, action, or assent to harmfulness. This precept advocates the protection of all forms of life, and certainly can be applied to cultivating an attitude of respect toward individual creatures as well as ecosystems. To support this discipline, Patanjali includes four additional vows. Truthfulness (*satya*) can be used to inspire acknowledgement of wrongdoing to the living realm. Not stealing (*asteya*) can be applied to remedy the imbalance of resource consumption in modern times. Sexual restraint (*brahmacarya*) can be used as a corrective to the crass commercialization of sex as well for population control. Non-possession (*aparigraha*) allows one to minimize the greed and hoarding that has plundered the planet. These five practices entail holding back, disciplining oneself, saying no to such behaviors as violence, lying, stealing, lust, and possessiveness.

The second stage of Patanjali’s Yoga seeks to cultivate positive behaviors that can similarly be interpreted through the prism of heightened ecological awareness. Five practices are listed. Purity (*saucha*) can be seen in terms of keeping one’s body, thoughts, and intentions clean in regard to one’s surroundings. Contentment (*santosha*) encourages a philosophy of accepting what is “enough” and not striving to gather more than one truly needs. Austerity (*tapas*) entails putting oneself in difficult situations for the purposes of purification and the building of strong character. Self-study (*svadhyaya*) generally entails reading and reflecting on philosophical texts and
in the case of environmental applications might include reading the nature poets. Devotion to god (isvara pranidhana) for an environmentalist might encourage regular forays into the wilderness to feel that important connection with the awe that nature inspires. Each of these serves as a touchstone for self-exploration and appreciation of one’s place within the world.

The third phase of Patanjali’s eightfold system, the practice of yoga postures (asana) receives relatively scant mention in the Yoga Sutra. Patanjali states that the purpose of performing the physical exercise of yoga is to gain “steadiness and ease, resulting in relaxation of effort and endless unity” (YS II: 46–47). In later centuries, this aspect of yoga was adumbrated and expanded by later writers, who draw extensive parallels between the practice of physical yoga and the ability to see one’s relationship with the animal realm.

In order to understand the significance of animals as it develops in later yoga traditions, we need to discuss briefly the nature of shamanism. Mircea Eliade describes the importance of shamanic rituals that display intimacy with specific animals as follows:

Imitating the gait of an animal or putting on its skin was acquiring a superhuman mode of being . . . by becoming this mythic animal, man becomes something far greater and stronger than himself . . . He who, forgetting the limitations and false measurements of humanity, could rightly imitate the behavior of animals – their gait, breathing, cries, and so on – found a new dimension in life: spontaneity, freedom, “sympathy” with all the cosmic rhythms and hence bliss and immortality (Eliade 1963: 460).

These remarks by Eliade underscore the important relationship cultivated between humans and animals from prehistoric times. Animals were noted for their particular abilities and accomplishments. To imitate these fine qualities was considered a sign of spiritual attainment.

In the later Yoga texts, animals play an important role. Many postures (asanas) carry the names of animals. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, written by Svatmarama in the fifteenth century, lists several poses named for animals. Some examples are the Cow Head’s Pose (Gomukha asana) [HYP 20], the Tortoise Pose (Kurma asana) [HYP 24], the Rooster Pose (Kukkuta asana) [HYP 25], the Peacock Pose (Mayur asana) [HYP 32], and the Lion’s Pose (Simha asana) [HYP 52–54].

Additionally, later Yoga manuals such as the Gheranda Samhita include several additional poses named for animals, including the Serpent Pose (Naga asana), the Rabbit Pose, the Cobra Pose (Bhujangha asana), the Locust Pose (Salabha asana), the Crow Pose (Kakasana), the Eagle Pose (Gauruda asana), the Frog Pose (Manduka asana), and the Scorpion Pose (Vrischika asana), to name a few.

Yoga practice does have an emotional effect that goes beyond mere strength or flexibility of the body. In the performance of the Peacock pose, one feels a sense of balance, a sense of pride, an affirmation of one’s ability to move competently in the world. In the Eagle pose, one feels a sense of entwinedness and focus, a honing of one’s vision and purpose. In the Cobra pose, one feels both a tremendous gravity and a rising up, a sense of being weighted and glued to the Earth, yet yearning and stretching to rise above. In the Lion pose one feels positively regal, refreshed and energized. At the close of a Yoga session one feels renewed and in a sense redefined, prepared to encounter the world with greater agility and balance.

In India, animals are part of one’s everyday reality, even in the cities. One encounters cows, goats, cats, dogs, and numerous other animals on a daily, sometimes continuous basis. People often feed birds before taking their own meal, birds that fly into the home at dinner time, expecting acknowledgement. Gurani Anjali, a contemporary teacher of yoga, has urged her students to observe animals, to learn from animals. One has a sense that the attention required to move into and sustain a Yoga pose carries a connection with the ancient shamanic tradition of animal imitation.

However, it could also be argued that a danger lies in over-romanticizing the mysterious or shamanic aspects of animal mimesis. For instance, Denise Kaufman, a prominent yoga teacher in Los Angeles, suggests that one adapt an animal mimesis. For instance, Denise Kaufman, a prominent Yoga teacher in Los Angeles, suggests that one adopt a largely empirical attitude toward doing Yoga and relating with animals. In an interview she commented:

Animals move; people can learn about movement from animals. House pets stretch all day long, creating space in their joints. Animals sit in different kinds of positions. Monkeys and apes do things with their hands. Perhaps as humans we need to reclaim our four leggedness. Getting down on all fours stimulates the pranic flow. Sitting in chairs tightens the hamstrings and the lower back. Animals don’t sit on furniture; they have not built things contrary to their nature (personal communication, February 1999).

From her perspective, Yoga involves recapturing our animal physicality, reconditioning the body to establish itself within a non-technologically enhanced environment.

The relationship between sacred power and the human cannot be divorced from the harnessing of the deep images evoked by intimacy with the animal world. Early peoples of India revered animals. They depicted animals in tableaus of adornment. They surrounded their early sacred meditating yogis with animals. Animals find prominence
in classical literature. The later medieval Yoga texts explicitly prescribe animal poses as integral to mystical attainment.

We learn to be empathetic and connected from our experience of and relationship with animals. As Thomas Berry has noted, our consciousness as humans, our development and affectivity, radically depend upon our openness and sensitivity to the natural order. To the extent that Yoga heightens our senses and brings us into visceral relationship with the nonhuman realm, our own sense of worth, well-being and connectedness becomes enhanced.

Following the mastery of the physical realm through Yoga postures, one reaches the capacity to effectively control the breath (pranayama), the fourth phase of Yoga. As noted earlier, the breath plays an important role in the philosophy of the Upanisads, and in the Yoga Sutra the mastery of the inbreath and outbreath leads to "dissolving the covering of light" (YS II: 52). The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and the *Gheranda Samhita* describe intricate techniques for manipulating the breath. Through this process, one reaches into the core of one’s life-force, sees the relationship between breathing and thinking, and cultivates an inwardsness and stability, leading to Patanjali’s fifth phase, the command of the senses (pratyahara). This ability to draw one’s energy into oneself opens one to the higher “inner” practices of Yoga: concentration, meditation, and *Samadhi*, collectively known as *samyama*. Conrued through an ecological prism, the inner work from the controlling the breath to *Samadhi* can be seen as enhancing one’s sensitivity to nature, an increase in empathy, and a willingness to stand to protect the beauty of the Earth. In a sense, the culmination of Yoga leads one to the very beginning point of nonviolence, a sense that no harm must be allowed.

The beginning of this inner threefold process requires sustained exercises of concentration (dharana). A standard concentration practice entails attention given first to the great elements (mahabhutas), then to the sensory operations (tanmatras), the sense and action organs (buddhindriyas and karmendriyas) and finally to the threefold operation of the mind (manas, ahankara, buddhi). By concentrating on the Earth (prthivi) one gains a sense of groundedness and a heightened sense of fragrance. By reflecting on water (jala), one develops familiarity with fluidity and sensitivity to the vehicle of taste. Through attention to light and heat (tejas, agni), one arrives at a deep appreciation for the ability to see. Awareness of the breath and wind (prana, sava) brings a sense of quiet and tactile receptivity. All these specific manifestations occur within the context of space (akasha), the womb or container of all that can be perceived or heard.

Intimacy with the sensory process allows one to maintain focus on the operations of the mind. Thoughts (cittavrtti) generated in the mind lead one to question and investigate the source of one’s identity and ego (ahamkara). Probing more deeply into the constituent parts of one’s personality, one begins to uncover the maze and mire of karmic accretions housed in the deep memory structures (buddhi), lightened and released gently through reflective and meditative processes. However, in order for any of these purifications to arise, an intimate familiarity with the body and collection of habits must occur, an intimacy that takes place through an understanding of time and place. Yoga enables a person to embrace and understand the close connection between the body and the world. By understanding each, one attains a state of clarity.

From an ecological perspective, the practice of Yoga can prove beneficial. Through Yoga one can begin to see the importance of the food we eat in constructing our bodies. One can find a calmness of mind through which to appreciate the stunning beauty of landscape and sunset and sunrise. Through Yoga, one can understand that all things within the universe rely on the creative expression of the five great elements and that we gain access to all experience and all knowledge through our own sensuality and intuition. The practice of Yoga provides rich resources for persons to reconnect with the body and with the world. Through the insights and applications of Yoga, one can begin to live with the sensitivity, sensibility, and frugality required to uphold the dignity of life, stemming from a vision of the interconnectedness of all things.

Christopher Key Chapple

Further Reading


1786  Yolngu Ceremonial Architecture

See also: Ahimsa; Art of Living Foundation; Breathwork; Hinduism; Jainism; Martial Arts; Prakriti; Re-Earthling.

dancing dwellings act as “vehicle for change” in which contexts. For example, in certain Yolngu sacred histories, things change and are enhanced when used in ceremonial places, but they create a temporal and spatial reference in which the people, places and actions “become” those of the Ancestors. Hence, Yolngu Ancestors are not considered part of the past, they are “ever present” in the places, things, people and marks they made in the landscape. The social identity of Yolngu people is partly constructed through their connection to particular Ancestors and places.

Yolngu ceremony grounds are places of worship that allow Yolngu to connect with their Ancestors, and although they are “unroofed,” the combination of place, structures and symbols constitute an indigenous ceremonial architecture. Structures that can be called “ceremonial architecture” are not shelters or dwellings per se, but are important religious symbols and spatial/architectural tools that are employed during ceremony. Although a number of these structures may be similar to those employed in everyday domiciliary life, their meanings change and are enhanced when used in ceremonial contexts. For example, in certain Yolngu sacred histories, flaming dwellings act as “vehicle for change” in which Ancestral Beings are burnt and metamorphosed into another state following the breaking of a moral code, and then continue their respective journeys.

During the process of Yolngu mortuary ceremonies the deceased’s soul is transported back to their ancestral homeland through the invocations of song and actions of dance, incorporating sacred objects, structures and sculpted landforms. The sculpted landforms can be either representations of Ancestors themselves, the remnant marks of ancestral actions left on the landscape, or maps of the places they created. The sculpted landforms, which are low Earth ridges creating a diagram when viewed from above, are particular to the deceased’s social identity. They are also a metaphor for the ancestral homeland to which the soul of the deceased will be transported through the process of the ceremony. Around and within the sculpted land forms, the Yolngu “dance” the actions characteristic of the Ancestors and undertake purification rituals in circular pits or wells by washing and cleansing themselves, as well as burning items that have had direct contact with the deceased’s body.

Accompanying the sculpted landforms may be specially constructed shelters to hold the body of the deceased until the burial stage of the ceremony. Each shelter is specific to each mortuary ceremony and is given the name of the ancestral resting place that it symbolizes. The shelters are often decorated with feathers, shells, string and applied patterns, every detail of which relates to the social identity of different kin who are aiding the deceased on their journey. Mortuary shelters can be laden with symbolism and religious knowledge about the deceased that can only be interpreted by initiated members of the group. The form of the shelter may represent both the Ancestor, a geographical place that was the resting place of the Ancestor, and other physical manifestations of the ancestor.

Other objects representing particular characteristics of the Ancestor or ancestral homeland may also be incorporated into mortuary ceremonies. Externally, these objects may be present as upright forked posts and a ridge-pole (sometimes symbolic of a dwelling of the Ancestor), a rock, a dead tree trunk positioned vertically in the ground with suspended paperbark parcels of bones, or a line of decorated string (symbolic of all the Yolngu groups associated with the Ancestor and linked through country and ceremony). Such objects act as spatial and semiotic markers for the ceremonial participants.

Hollow logs and mortuary flags are other elements of Yolngu mortuary ceremonies. Hollow log coffins were traditionally used to store the deceased’s clean and crushed bone remains and were placed in a vertical position on the ground. Such log coffins are highly decorated with Yolngu symbols and have been transformed into a contemporary art form. Mortuary flag poles are used to denote or bring news of death, and were erected in the ground near a customary camp, or outside houses in
Yolngu Waters of Being (Australia)

In northeast Arnhem Land, Australia, the Yolngu people have a sensory awareness of the land and waters in which their personal and group identities and essences reside. All human, animal, vegetable, mineral, and atmospheric elements are placed in a complex, interwoven web of social and spiritual connections and significations. This web of belonging is determined by affiliation to one or other of two exogamous patrilineal moieties, or halves of the cosmos, called Dhuwa and Yirritja. These ties bind all things together and underpin the Ancestral Law – a set of social, moral and spiritual rules laid down in the distant past by ancestral beings. Ancestral beings were simultaneously human and animal and left human essences in the landscape as they transformed country by making rivers, carving out headlands, creating waterholes and leaving ancestral power in the environment. The first Ancestors birthed people at different waterholes and then returned inside, marking the land and the waters where their spiritual essence remains today.

So, when Yolngu look at waters they do not just see a clear liquid substance, but they perceive the embodiment of living and deceased relations as well as Ancestral Beings. These waters hold the memories of loved ones while reflecting images of their own bodies and spiritual essences that will one day come to be subsumed in water at death. Different waters resonate, meander, bubble, gurgle and change color as they tell of family members, their personalities and influence upon others. When freshwater and saltwater merge, they communicate processes of conception and birth, while particular water movements depict the consummation of marriage in the mingling and swirling of waves. A senior Wangurri man commented to me:

There’s a good relationship there – for marriage. It shows how we are related to other people because the water forms that relationship for us. The freshwater and the land have overlapping stories with the sea as they form the basis of close relationships (Mathulu, personal communication).

Currents are always viewed in relation to river sources where freshwater and saltwater mix in swirling streams at particular points, generally at the mouth of a river. These confluences occur most commonly between mother, ngândi, and child, waku, currents or between grandmother, märi, and granddaughter, gutharra, watercourses. When waters come together the Yolngu call it ganma and say the water tastes brackish, dhäkay-murrkthuna (a term that provokes much amusement from those singing or talking about it) as it can imply the mixing of bodily fluids in sexual intercourse. In particular, the frothy bubbling of major water courses is known as gapu-djulk, also

Further Reading


See also: Aboriginal Art; Aboriginal Dreaming (Australia); Australia; Rock Art – Australian Aboriginal; Trees – as Religious Architecture.
the term for the breaking of waters at birth and the placenta.

The topography of ancestral waters further embodies human anatomical parts: the fresh waterholes are referred to as the eye, *manguti*; a stream is the neck, *mayang*. Adjoining tributaries are the arms, *wana*; and the points of confluence of two tributaries are known as the elbows, *likan*. The lower reaches of the river are referred to as a tail or leg, *yangara*, and are referred to more generally as the bottom, *dhudi*; while close to the shoreline coastal waters are known as chest waters, *gumurr gapu*. Bundurr ritual group surnames identify freshwater and saltwater people with the upper or lower reaches of rivers. For example, in the Yirritja moiety, the “bottom” *Gumatji, Gumatji-dhä lukilili*, are known by one surname, *Munungguritj*, and come from *Bawaka*. Their surname is synonymous with the tail portion of their ancestral crocodile in the saltwater. The two other sub-groups, Burarrwanga and Mununggurii from Biranybirany are aligned with the headwaters of the crocodile in the form of a spring that joins with the lower reaches of the river.

Personal and group affiliations to and authority in water can only be fully accessed through ritual language as Rev. Dr. Djiniyini Gondarre, leader of the Golumala clan and Aboriginal representative for the Australian Church Congress, told me, “The relationship between these identities can only be known as you sing.” Songs tell of waters washing upon the land, reflecting the genealogical ties of individuals and groups through their movements, colors and sounds while simultaneously marking those who do not belong to an area. Performing identities from the sea and land, then, becomes a way of knowing the self and others as waves of song invoke ancestral power through musical experience, combining movements of the ancestral past in the landscape and seascape with Yolŋu identities in the present.

_Fiona Magowan_

**Further Reading**


See also: Aboriginal Dreaming (Australia); Australia; Mammy Water; Water in Islam; Water in Zoroastrianism; Water Spirits and Indigenous Ecological Management.

**Yoruba Culture (West Africa)**

The Yoruba constitute a linguistic, cultural, and political entity in West Africa. They claim common ancestry in Odudua and they developed the concept of *ebi* (kinship) as a symbol of unity. The Yoruba established kingdoms, many of which survived until the nineteenth century when the imposition of colonial administration engendered a new geopolitical configuration in Nigeria. The political rearrangement affected the Yoruba because while the majority of them are in Nigeria, others found themselves in what later became the present-day Republic of Benin and Togo. People of Yoruba ancestry also constitute a sizeable portion of the African Diaspora, the result of the trans-continental migration occasioned by the Atlantic slave trade. Wherever the Yoruba people exist, their interlocking concept of religion and nature remains with them. Their emphasis on the sacredness of life underscores the importance they place on religion and nature as well as their political and socio-cultural institutions. For example, *Ori* ("head," signifying the origin of life), land (that produces food and supports the living and the dead), kingship, marriage, naming, death, places of worship and religious rituals are held sacred. The Yoruba worship many deities, revere and deify ancestors, and use natural phenomena to personify deities. In the past, Yoruba religion contributed to the preservation of the natural flora and fauna in that virtually all settlements were surrounded by green belts in addition to numerous groves, which harboured various species of shrubs and trees as well as animals. Until the assault of Islam, Christianity, and Western civilization, Yoruba religion not only attached sacredness to nature, it also helped to preserve physical environment from human encroachment. Clearly, nature plays a prominent role in Yoruba religious beliefs and practices.

The Yoruba refer to the beginning of life as *oriran* or *orisun* (the source of the stream of life) therefore every household worshipped Ori, the god of fate. The Yoruba, however, possess the concept of a Supreme Being. In Yoruba religion, there are no temples, no sacrifices, no regular prayers, and no priests to the Supreme Deity because he is assumed to reside in the remote sky called *Orun* (Heaven). According to their cosmogony, Odudumare (the Creator), also known as Olorun (the Owner of Heaven), designated divinities to create the Earth. One strand of their tradition states that the Earth existed as a watery, marshy waste and divinities, possibly human beings, used to descend from heaven on a spider’s web to hunt on the vast expanse of water. To create solid Earth, Odudumare gave Obatala (or Orisa-nla), one of the divinities, a handful
of sand, a pigeon, and sixteen palm kernels. Obatala let loose the pigeon to spread the sand in order to create dry land. Obatala planted the palm kernels to explain how trees came into being. The spot on which these events took place is called Ille-Ife (that which is wide).

A variant tradition believes that although Obatala was originally designated, it was Odudua, another divinity, who carried out the assignment of creating dry land and all living things. Odudua supposedly supplanted Obatala and descended to the Earth through a gold chain, equipped with a snail’s shell filled with sand, a white hen, a black cat, five pieces of iron, and a palm nut. Odudua led the delegation to the world and landed on a hill called Okete-Oramfe (the hill of expansion) in Ille-Ife. The hen spread the sand and farmland appeared. Hence, the Yoruba regard Ille-Ife as the nucleus of life and their “Garden of Eden.”

The Yoruba creation story accentuates the importance of nature and why it constitutes a major part of their religion. They conceptualize religion and nature as intricately interwoven because all natural phenomena originated from Olodumare, as indicated in the attribute Oba a s’eda aye (King, the creator of the Earth).

The Yoruba worship many Òrisas (gods and goddesses), which Bolaji Idowu referred to as the ministers of Olodu-mare. They act as intermediaries between humans and Olodumare and the leading ones include Ṣa’u, Esu, Obatala (Orisa-nla), Ogun, Orunmila, Osun, Sango, and Yemoja. The places of worship, which are approached with an aura of sacrosanctity, include the grave of ancestors, shrines and temples, groves, hills and mountains, trees, banks of rivers, and markets. Land, on which these places of worship are erected, is also held sacred. D.O. Fagunwa, a prominent Yoruba novelist, became popular through one of his books Igbo Olodumare (The Forest of the Almighty).

Although the Yoruba claim that they have 401 divinities, there seem to be more when several other local deities are added. The worship of numerous gods and natural phenomena is not unique to the Yoruba people. For their pantheon compares with other African peoples. The slave trade, which forced many Yoruba people to North and South America, and the European partition, which arbitrarily divided the Yoruba, helped spread the worship of Sango, which Olodumare empowered Esu, the trickster divinity, to mediate between the forces of good and evil and convey the secret power of rituals and sacrifices to other divinities, in order to reduce evil exploits on humans. Wande Abimbola, a distinguished scholar of Yoruba religions, asserts that Esu changes his appearance and is capable of assuming 256 different forms of existence. Represented by a block of ironstone upon which worshippers pour palm oil, and by a wooden carved staff, Esu favors those who sacrifice to him. Hence the Yoruba say eni o rubo ni Esu u qbe (Esu supports he who offers sacrifice). Esu, in Yoruba belief, is therefore different from the Christian concept of the devil. Yemoja is known as the goddess of waters and motherhood because the lagoons, oceans, rivers, and seas flow out of her body. Because of Ogun’s nature, he is variably referred to as a violent god, the forest god, master of iron, and god of war, and is widely worshipped by hunters, blacksmiths, or people whose occupations deal with iron. Other sobriquets associate Ogun with wealth for he is called Onile owo, Onile ola, Onile kangunkangan ode orun (the owner of the house of money, the owner of the house of riches, the owner of the innumerable houses of heaven). Sango, a historical figure as the fourth Alaafin (King) of the Oyo Empire, was deified after his death. Owing to his violent disposition and ability to emit fire from his mouth, Sango is known as the god of thunder and lightning while Oya, his wife, is the goddess of thunderstorms. One of the songs devotees render during the worship of Sango partly states: A so’gi d’eniyan; bi o soro, a s’eniyan d’eranko (He turns a tree into a man; when he chooses to be ferocious, he turns a man into an animal). Sacrifice is an indispensable aspect of worship in Yoruba religion and every divinity has its favorite food items for sacrifice as well as taboos. For example, food items such as egbo (mashed maize), pounded yam, goats, and fish are offered to Oya but dog is her taboo. While Esu accepts grains of maize, fowls, he-goats, and dogs, he despises adin (oil extracted from palm-kernels).

Like the Borgu people, the Yoruba also venerate animals and reptiles as totems. According to Yoruba belief, animals and plants have souls. The land, hills, rivers, rocks, and trees, which spirits inhabit, are held sacred. Samuel Johnson referred to totems as denoting the origin of a family. There are Erin (Elephant), Oni (Crocodile), Agbo (Rami), and Okin (the Lovebird), Ojo (Rain), Lion, Python, and Cobra families. Clan or lineage members recognize these animals and reptiles as members of their families and their assistance can be sought from time to time for various reasons. Oni (Crocodile) families observe an elaborate burial ceremony for a dead crocodile. The crocodile is wrapped in a white piece of cloth and buried like a
human being in a grave. During the ceremony, three fowls are sacrificed, drums are beaten, guns are shot, and clan members entertain their friends with food and drinks.

Secret societies formed part of the Yoruba religious belief system. The societies were secret because membership was restricted and they often engaged in mysterious activities (only the initiates having knowledge of these activities). Secret societies with a religious background are mainly concerned with the cult of the dead and they wield enormous power over their communities. The cults include the Aje (Witches), Ogboni, Oro, Egungun, Agemo, and Eluku. Some of these cults also performed social and political functions. The Ogboni, a political society, held the symbol of metal images of human figurines (Edon), which the uninitiated could not see. The society is known as Imole in Ile-Ife and Oshugbo in Ijebu. Robert Smith, a historian of the Yoruba people, described the Ogboni society as “a semi-cult devoted to the worship of the Earth, which wielded both religious and political sanctions” (1988: 93-4). The religious activities of the Ogboni included the worship of the Earth spirit (ile) and members wore beads on their necks and wrist, tied a wrapper across the left shoulder, and wore a sash (Itaagbe) over their right shoulder.

The Egbe Awo (Association of Diviners) is often misconstrued as having maleficient purposes and activities. The training of an Ifa student lasts about ten years with a complex initiation process. During this time, the individual acquires knowledge and skills in the field of divination, medicine, pharmacy, psychiatry, psychology, and philosophy. There is a great deal of interaction between religion and nature in these branches of religious and healing practice.

The concept of life after death predominates in Yoruba religion. The Ifa corpus clearly states that the soul does not die but transposes to a new world. Thus the Yoruba regard the Earth as a marketplace, or as a journey, and heaven is their permanent home. It is believed that the ancestors watch over and influence the affairs of the living. To maintain a good relationship and to receive blessings from the ancestors, regular or annual visits and sacrifices are offered at the oju ibo (“the place of worship” that is, the gravesites of ancestors), often located within the compound. The different types of sacrifice include thanksgiving, votive, propitiatory, and preventive. Sacrifices also occur during the laying of the foundation of a house or at the beginning of a business venture. Requests for childbirth, improved health, and success at work are made to the ancestors. The concept of an afterlife also calls for good behavior on Earth because people will reap in heaven what they sow on Earth. Egungun (masquerades), believed to embody the spirits of the ancestors, appear during funeral ceremonies.

The Yoruba express their religious beliefs in names, epithets, proverbs, and songs. Proverbs such as “good character is a god; the better the worship, the more the blessings”; “there is no god like the throat; it accepts sacrifices everyday”; “no god favors a lazy person; he can prosper only by using his hands to work”; and “nothing can be done to the Ifa oracle to prevent it from behaving like palm kernels” (palm kernels are used in the consultation of the Ifa Oracle) illustrate the extent of the intersection of Yoruba religion and nature.

Many rivers, hills, and trees in Yorubaland are also objects of veneration. Notable among the rivers are: the Niger (Oya), Ogun, Owena, Oni, and Osun. River-spirits are appeased to prevent flooding and disaster during the rainy season. Yemoja (the deity mother of all rivers and fishes) is believed to be a generous giver of children. Prominent hills such as Iyamopo in Igbeti, Oke-Ibadan in Ibadan, Olumo Rock in Abeokuta, Oke Ila in Igbomina, and Asabar in Saki are worshipped. Iyamopo’s appellation, “The hill of protection, the mighty hill that flattens its back to carry its children,” indicates its protective role in Yoruba warfare. Sacrifices are offered to the Orosun hill at Idaunre and the Ajo and Okelota hills at Ado-Ekiti on an annual basis for their protective values. The Yoruba respond to their forest environment by venerating the deities who live in trees such as iroko (Chlorophora excelsa), cotton tree (Eriodendron orientale), baobab (Adansonia digitata), and ayan (African satinwood where the god of drums resides).

The Yoruba apply their artistic skillfulness to express their religious beliefs. Wood carving, drawing, and painting found in shrines depict their high level of artistic imagery. The style and features of an image more often than not portray the religious emotions of the artist. Carved images are mere symbols and not the real objects of worship. But because Oludumare is supreme and remote, there are no images, no liturgies, and no shrines dedicated to him.

Religion and nature are almost inseparable elements in Yoruba history and culture. The deifying of people, the worshipping of deities, and the reverencing of animals, reptiles, and trees prevail in Yoruba religious practices. Nature has been so ingrained in Yoruba religion that food items are offered to the gods and leaves and roots are used for charms, and treatment of illnesses. Severing nature from religion is tantamount to rendering the Yoruba culture and belief system worthless.

The introduction of Christianity through the European missionaries and Islam through Muslim merchants has not detached Yoruba religion from nature. Christianity made significant inroads among the Yoruba, most especially because of its attractive elements of Western education and medicine, and Islam is fast growing. Christianity and Islam have drawn their adherents from and have denigrated the Yoruba religion. Each opposed its closeness to nature. The impacts of Islam and Christianity have been crushing on Yoruba religion, particularly since both of them received encouragement during the colonial period,
and subsequent political administrations after independence have promoted them.

The number of adherents of the Yoruba religion is dwindling in the face of competition from Christianity and Islam, but the religion has not been completely displaced in the society. Although still struggling to survive, the most persistent attempts at revitalization come from Africans in diaspora who see a commitment to Yoruba religion as an identity or a key in the search for their roots. The preservation and revitalization of the Yoruba religion is carried on at the Oyotunji village, outside Beaufort in South Carolina, where the religion is practiced. The frequent pilgrimages to Yorubaland, such as during the Osun festival at Osogbo and the IFA festival at Ile Ife, have become pointers to the greater global dimension that Yoruba religion has assumed. There is also the quasi-academic attempt to preserve knowledge of Yoruba religion in the World Ifa Congress, which seems to be of some attraction in the Americas. However, contemporary economic problems faced by people on the African continent have had negative effects, giving rise to charlatans, just as attempts to modernize have resulted in bastardization. Divination and traditional healing systems, which are intricately intertwined with Yoruba religion and nature, are still carried out in modern times. This shows that Yoruba religion continues to exist in spite of the challenges it faces from other religions.

Julius O. Adekunle

Further Reading
See also: Candomblé Brazil; Caribbean Cultures; Congo River Watershed; Diola (West Africa); Santería; Saro-Wiwa, Kenule Beeson – and the Ogoni of Ogoni; Umbanda; Wenger, Susan, Yoruba Art, and the Oshogbo Sacred Grove; West Africa.

Yoruba Culture and the Euchee (Yuchi) Language Project (Southeastern United States)

The struggle of the Yuchi (also spelled Euchee) community to pass forward its ancient language to younger generations is representative of challenges facing the majority of indigenous nations bounded by elaborated colonial economic and social structures. As of this writing there are only six remaining elders out of perhaps 2400 Yuchis who are available to help teach the language to younger members of the Yuchi community. The Yuchi nation arrived at this point of extreme urgency in the life of its language only after exhibiting extraordinary resiliency across many generations. Yuchi people were accosted by successive and overlapping waves of physical genocide, brutal dislocation, and forced assimilation.

In ancient times Yuchi people were found in the area now known as Tennessee and lived primarily in the areas that became known as Georgia and Alabama throughout the colonial and early American periods. They had established towns along the ample rivers in the region, living primarily from corn and other crops, with seasonal celebrations for the gifts that sustained their society. During the decade of the 1830s they, along with other nations in the region, suffered deadly dislocation under President Andrew Jackson with many Yuchis taken in chains a thousand miles to what became known as Oklahoma.

Although the displaced peoples brought their sacred ceremonial fires as centers of their social, economic and political lives to their new locations, they were faced with an enormous and accelerating shift in their subsistence patterns and traditional ethos with dramatic implications for ceremonial life and their understanding of the world. In the old homelands the major ceremonial traditions and daily ritual activities related rather directly to the long-standing subsistence patterns and lifestyle of the society. They mediated a fit between the regular requirements of hunting and planting and the broad understanding of how the world worked, both reinforcing proper behavior and reflecting this larger worldview.

The central ceremonial cycle focused on what has been
discussed in scholarly literature as Green Corn ceremonialism. The annual ceremonies celebrated the beginning of a new year with fresh crops and was marked by a new fire rite. Community members were forbidden to partake of fresh corn until these ceremonies of purification and thanksgiving had been completed. This was a time of renewal and cleansing for the community as members carried out their founding instructions, reenacting ancient primal events. The timing was based on the seasonal movements of the sun and moon and required careful observation of plant life for gathering all the proper medicines. The special use of certain animals, such as garfish and terrapins, also required an intimate engagement with the animal world.

All these ceremonial traditions are still followed by those community members who remain active in one or more of the three ongoing Yuchi ceremonial grounds. The “clean ground,” as it is referred to in the language, where the ceremonies are carried out, becomes a sacred space where expressions of strife between members is forbidden. The central ceremonial area, often referred to as the “big house” in the language, is carefully oriented within the cosmos along the four directions and founded with sacred medicines in the fireplace at the center point. This ritual space is where the entire family of the Yuchi community is welcomed with their friends and where ceremonial ground members, from both the present day and earlier times, gather to carry out their ceremonial responsibilities for another year. The longer cycle of four ritual ball games and four dances culminates in a structured time of ritual separation between men and women, fasting, taking medicines, and purification rites. Only after the sacred ground itself has been fed medicine can the fast be broken and a time of communal feasting begun. These ceremonies hinge explicitly upon using the gifts of particular medicine plants and on the special songs given long ago by a specific large bird. It is through a set of special dances (misleadingly referred to as social dances by some scholars) that relations are renewed and maintained with specified plants and animals.

These traditions now face great challenges. The process of physical displacement in the nineteenth century had created an extremely difficult transition period for keeping proper relations with the new living environment. Community members increasingly came under the influence of the material arrangements and social values of the larger society. There was a broad shift in such areas as the traditional family, clan relations, residency patterns, medicinal practices, and reliance on traditional agriculture. These mounting pressures combined with corrosive influences from both native and non-native churches through the late twentieth century, from Euro-American education, and “allotment,” the breaking up of communal lands into small individual holdings by the federal government. All of this created pressure on the ceremonial traditions and challenged the underlying worldview. The displacement of traditional foods by store-supplied items had perhaps the greatest impact on the underpinnings and practices of traditional society as many of the daily ritual activities and traditional arts fell into disuse. The ceremonial calendar was adapted to fit modern work schedules. Current community members no longer live by farming and do not normally raise traditional crops of corn, beans, squash or tobacco. The strong link between the celebrations of the main ceremonies and this form of livelihood is no longer so apparent. The natural environment around the community was subjected to degradation and modern waterway management techniques instituted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers resulted in the flooding of ecological niches where many of the important plants were previously collected, making it harder to find plant sources for traditional foods and medicines. The relationship with animals was greatly attenuated as many species were driven to near-extinction.

Against these imposed difficulties Yuchis still perform the buffalo dance at their annual ceremonies despite having virtually no contact with the animals since the mid-nineteenth century, whereas they were once common in the original homeland areas of the Yuchi in what is now referred to as the southeastern United States. Responding to the rhythms of the Earth, many within the Yuchi nation continue to maintain their ancient ceremonies as the center of community life, with its implicit ethic teaching a life of balance and harmony. The health of the Yuchi nation in proper relation to the larger community of life depends on these vital ancient activities. Indeed, in traditional perspective the continuity of the cosmos itself is tied to the successful completion of these ceremonial duties. In turn, the ceremonies themselves rest on the use of the Yuchi language. While the language has always been an essential bearer of Yuchi culture, the role of the language is now further heightened. As the ethos in the community continues to tilt in the direction of the enormous weight applied by Euro-American society, the value of the language becomes even more critical for passing forward a tradition-rich view of the world.

In the case of the Yuchi – like many other nations – the long-term processes of physical genocide and cultural assault were coupled with a kind of intellectual erasure in which the very existence of the Yuchi nation and language were denied for over a century and a half in government reports and published authoritative sources. The published denials continue into the present and now include internet sources and current reference publications. The community was again denied formal recognition by the federal government in 1995. The language itself is spoken by few, has no known cousins from which to borrow or learn, and has no standard orthography.

Despite these many obstacles, the Yuchi people remain as bearers of a unique language, even as they maintain
Yuchi has been identified as a language isolate, standing apart from groups of related languages in what are termed language families. As such, the language transmitted by today’s elders represents one of the world’s cultural treasures from an immemorial human past. With only a handful of fluent speakers the community has launched into an aggressive revitalization effort led by the Euchee (Yuchi) Language Project with the goal of passing their ancient language forward from current speakers (whose average age is over 80 years) to a new line of younger speakers who will be enabled to carry forward the language for the benefit of coming generations. Even as there were those who carried the coals from our ancient ceremonial places a thousand miles to unknown lands so that the fires of our traditions could be rekindled and spread again among the people, so we now pursue the goal of developing a second handful of competent speakers who can carry forward the language to later generations.

This goal has necessitated a focus on immersion learning in small clusters of master and apprentice teams. The most valuable and essential asset to the project has been the support and knowledge of the gifted speakers of the language, as we rely on elders who grew up in the 1920s—the last generation with a large percentage of first-language speakers of Yuchi. Various arms of the Euchee (Yuchi) Language Project (ELP) include community outreach through a newsletter and Yuchi language radio and a Yuchi language page in the Muscogee Nation News. Weekly language classes for children and beginners have been conducted since 1993 building off of several earlier community classes. These classes not only seek to address in an appropriate manner the language needs for the ceremonial ways but have also sought to pass forward through hands-on methodologies traditional arts, agricultural practices, and older lifeways built around identifying, gathering, and preparing traditional foods. Perhaps the greatest challenge for second-language learners is to develop enough competence in the language to absorb the fullness of the underlying worldview reflected in the language. Another arm of the ELP deals with documentation and archiving of extant recordings. The purpose of creating and maintaining these recordings is to expand the memories of the Yuchi learners, as an aid that will allow them more time in which to absorb the rhythms and words that are their natural heritage. That is, the cohesive focus of these various aspects of the project is on finding potential dedicated learners and developing new speakers as quickly as possible.

While this approach specifically addresses the most urgent needs of the community it also serves to highlight the divergence between community needs and the interests of the academic enterprise (see Grounds 2003). Given the context of the extremely fragile status of the language, with so few fluent speakers the community is forced to decide between meeting the agenda of the academy with its focus on textual production or addressing the challenge of passing forward the oral language to a new generation of speakers with its time-consuming requirement of immersion in the spoken language.

The urgency and importance of the language revitalization work is of utmost value to the Yuchi community and, indeed, to the diversity of global humanity. As a linguistic isolate the Yuchi language provides a unique and direct link to an ancient human past. The language is the vehicle for intimate knowledge of medicine plants, local ecosystems, and hidden histories of the Yuchi people, and remains vital to the traditional ceremonies. The richness of the community life, as reflective of a unique worldview, is born by the language – a world that remains inaccessible through the English language, a world in which men and women speak different forms of the language. This is a world in which the people referred to as Yuchis in history texts are known by a different name in their language, as the offspring of [the] Sun, who is recognized as female. There is an exceedingly musical and lyrical quality to the spoken rhythms of fluent Yuchi. This quality is bound up with the meaning of the language and effectively prevents first-language speakers from understanding the staccato delivery of English speakers in their early attempts to learn the Yuchi language.

The Yuchi cosmos is one that has no general term for animals and one whose grammar does not separate humans from animals. All living beings are recognized as part of the greater living world. Every Yuchi sentence that refers to an individual person (including animals) or to any non-person necessarily speaks in terms of their physical form in relationship to the Earth. In the evocative Yuchi language the place where one lives is where one habitually sits upon the Earth. The deepest beliefs of the most important rituals are mediated through the language. The healing process using powerful medicinal plants does not rely solely on their pharmaceutical properties but is traditionally administered with specific songs or chants that are essential for effecting a cure. Yuchi words are not empty symbols but are understood to have power and efficacy. The passage from this world to the next is mediated through ritual words in the language.

This extremely compelling understanding of the world – a beautiful and profound grasp of it – is at the same time fragile and precious due to its orality. Like other indigenous languages it can become all-but-lost in the span of a single generation. The Yuchi language is now making its last call to a younger generation to get in the dance, to join the ancient spiral of Yuchi culture bearers and learn the language, the depth of its melodies and the richness of its rhythms, so that a new generation will understand their place within the cosmos in the fullness of their primordial relation to the created world.

Richard A. Grounds
Further Reading
See also: Bison Restoration and Native American Traditions; Indigenous Environmental Network; Native American Languages (North America); Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Yunnan Region (Southwest China and Montane Mainland Southeast Asia)

Yunnan, meaning “south of the clouds,” is located in Southwest China bordered by the Tibet Autonomous Region and Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi provinces of China on the west, north and east, and the countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar to the south and southwest. Geophysically, Yunnan serves as the roof of Mainland Southeast Asia due to its location on the headwaters of all the major rivers within this montane region. The ecological health of this “roof” of southwest China and Southeast Asia is the concern of many stakeholders in all the surrounding countries and provinces. A planned increase in regional development will bring new and vast construction of communication and transportation infrastructure along the Mekong and other river systems. Yunnan, with a total area of 394,000 square kilometers, consists of 128 counties in 16 districts or prefectures and has a population of 42.9 million people, including 14.6 million ethnic minority peoples with diverse indigenous cultures and livelihoods. The ethnic minorities of the Yunnan uplands include Tibeto-Burman peoples, such as Tibetan, Naxi, Yi, Hani (Akha), Jingpo, Lisu, Lahu, Nu, Derung, Primi, and Jinuo; Mon-khmer, such as Wa, Bulang, and Deang; and Miao-Yao including the Miao and Yao. The ethnic minorities in Yunnan are characterized by complex dialects within groups and distinctive socio-economic systems because of the region’s biological complexity.

Sacred Knowledge
Many activists and scholars fear the loss of local knowledge in the region. Despite the dynamic cultural practices of indigenous people, their knowledge systems or indigenous knowledge, as they are called by outsiders, are rapidly fading away. Due to market penetration, out-migration and external education, the local languages, sacred knowledge and religious practices linked to worship of sacred space and maintenance of biodiversity has already been extinguished in some places. Although the indigenous people have been living in the mountain regions for thousands of years as hunters-gatherers, pastoralists, and agriculturalists, they are viewed by outsiders as objects to be managed rather than citizens in the mountain ecosystems. As managed objects, the political-administrative structures they are located in systematically marginalize their aspirations and the knowledge they apply to achieving them.
Sacred knowledge, as part of indigenous knowledge systems, is locally rooted in the culture of a particular geographical territory. Sacred knowledge refers to the nature (both geophysical and ecological environments), mythical cosmology, cultural beliefs, religious rituals and stories of a place assigned by people to their space. Sacred knowledge is mostly culturally or religiously transmitted, with the help of collective memory encoded in stories, myths, legends, songs, dances, rituals, and systems of classification of resources. Sacred knowledge constitutes a significant part of the identity of each cultural group and is a specialized knowledge often held by persons with special experiences, such as religious leaders within local communities. Some individuals in the local culture achieve a degree of coherence in rituals and other symbolic behavior and act as intermediates between the material and spiritual world. They are persons who possess sacred knowledge like the Bimo in Akha and Yi societies, or the Dongba in Naxi society or the Lama among the Tibetans. As young people are not taking over these roles and no longer know many practices recalled by elders, large gaps in knowledge are emerging between generations.

Sacred Space
Sacred space refers to sacred places (mountains, hills, lakes, rivers, temples, shrines, etc.), sacred objects (religious sculpture, stone, painting, hierogram, costumes and other sacred objects), and their associated life (animal, plants, trees, forest) and imaged super-nature (e.g., kylin, an imaged totem animal, with a deer-like body, covered scute, single horn, cattle tail. Chinese believe the kylin always bring good luck). Therefore sacred spaces are “contextualized” by the way they are expressed through “material culture,” such as any religious objects or any product of human expression in the geophysical landscape. The sacred space can vary from a few square meters to hundreds of square kilometers in the geophysical scale, and from household, community, multiple communities to multiple ethnic groups in the socio-cultural scale. Sacred spaces are maintained through practicing religious rituals, ceremonies and sanctions and participating within a specific cultural group. The sacred places or sites are the sources of powerful forces or energy; sacred objects are revelatory and powerful instruments in religious rituals; the associated life are either reincarnated human beings or
communicators between humans and nature; the imaged super-nature represents the soul of nature, which formulates the sacred ecological system for the natural landscape in the mountain region. Cultural identity is the vehicle to direct experience of the sacred. The sacred ecology refers to non-productive and non-reproductive, and the cultural dimension of interactions between human and nature in the particular terrain. The concepts of “connectivity” between humans and nature, existing in this and the next life, and the “spirituality” of nature and human behaviors and decision making are key principles for sacred ecology. The sacred ecology emphasizes that human beings are only part of the ecosystem and all life is equal in terms of power, skill, and moral responsibility.

Sacred Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Nature

Spirit of nature “shu”: The Naxi people's perception

Dongba is a term for a Naxi priest meaning “wise man” or “sage.” According to the mythological records in the manuscripts of Dongba religion, Dongba priests could communicate between humans and the spiritual world, and they advised clan chieftains. They are considered by the Naxi people to be wise men since they have sacred knowledge about the supernatural and natural worlds. They know how to pray for good luck, blessings and happiness and prevent bad luck and evil, and they know how to deal with relations between humans and nature. Various rituals are performed in different occasions for harmonizing relations with nature, such as worshipping the gods of grains and animal husbandry, the hunting spirits, the mountain god, the god for protection of villages, the spirits for the fireplace in the house, the god of blacksmith, the god for war and victory, the god for herb medicine, etc.

Shu is worshipped by the Naxi as a spirit of super-nature or god for governing nature. Shu has the shape of a human body with a snake tail, wearing a wubao hat (a hat with five treasures). In Naxi oral history, Shu and human beings used to be stepbrothers from the same father. When the two brothers split family property, humans got valleys, crops, and domestic animals, while Shu got mountains, rivers, forests, birds, and wild animals. Ever since, humans kept invading the property of Shu, and the latter became very angry and decided to take revenge by making it difficult for humans to survive. Humans appealed to Dongba to control Shu. Shiluo sent a rock warrior to conquer Shu. Under the mediation of Shiluo, humans and Shu made an agreement that they would never harm each other again. Humans could obtain the necessities of life from nature, but they had to pay Shu at certain times by worshipping it.

The Shu worshipping rite follows the evil repelling rite. Shu’s place is characterized by wood: plates representing heaven, Earth, and the five Shu kings, and the so-called repayment wood consisting of plates with drawings of different animals, the tower of Shu, and mountain bamboos. Shu’s place; consists of three parts: the first is heaven, Earth, and the five Shu kings; the second is the guard of Shu’s palace and the third is the foolish Shu’s place. One Dongba will chant scriptures in front of Shu’s place: “The Origin of Shu,” “Inviting Shu,” “Burninc Incenses,” “Offering Food,” and “Locking Shu’s Door.” This chanting indicates that they have invited heaven and Earth and all the Shu kings to stay in the village and enjoy the offerings of the humans. The Dongba will also chant “Wake Up Shu When The Rooster Crows,” “Offering Food,” “The Fight Between the Rock and Shu,” and stories about how human ancestors offended Shu and how Shu took its revenge, as well as how humans and Shu fought and were reconciled. Then they offer and serve Shu with medicine as they chant “The Origin of Medicine,” “Using Medicine,” and other scriptures to heal Shu’s wound from the bite of the rock, thereby repaying all the debts. They set free a chicken whose neck is tied with a ribbon of five strips of cloth which symbolize five dimensions as a promise to sacrifice another chicken the next year. The Dongba chant “Praying For Longevity” and “Praying For Blessings Befalling on
Offspring,” give gifts to all the Shu from different places, and then send them all back whence they came, accompanied by a chant of “Sending Off Shu.” Finally, they burn incense on the sacred altar, dance the godly dance, and send the gods up to the eighteenth layer of heaven with the chant “Sending Off Gods.” The Shu Worshipping Ritual is a solution that the Naxi ancestors found to the reconciliation of humans and nature in history. It is a means of reminding humans of their agreement with Shu. Only by disciplining themselves and living in harmony with Shu can humans ensure a good living environment and sustainable social development.

**Dai people’s “Holy Hills”**

The Dai people can be found in Northwest Vietnam, Upper Laos, Shan Hills of eastern Myanmar, Northern Thailand, and Southern Yunnan in southwest China. The valley-based Dai People in Xishuangbanna have practiced a predominantly Buddhist religion since the middle of the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Before the introduction of Hinayana Buddhism, the Dai people appear to have practiced a polytheistic religion bound heavily to the natural world. Like many early groups, the Dai associated forests, animals, and plants that inhabited them and the forces of nature with the spiritual realm. Proper actions and respect for the gods were believed to result in peace and well-being. Improper activities and disrespect incurred the wrath of the gods who punished the Dai villagers with a variety of misfortunes. Thus, the early Dai were encouraged to live in harmony with their surroundings, such as cultivating fuel wood (Cassia siamea) in the foothills and planting religious plants in the temple yard. In the traditional concepts of the Dai, the gods reside on the forested Holy Hills, or Nong in their own language. All the plants and animals that inhabit the Holy Hills are either companions of the gods or sacred living things in the gods’ garden. In addition, the Dai believe that the spirits of great and revered chieftains go to the Holy Hills to live, following their departure from the world of the living.

Holy Hills are an important visual landscape with good forest cover nearby the Dai village. They are a key component of the local ecosystems, which consists of paddy fields, home gardens, and cultivated fuel-wood forest. There appear to be two types of Holy Hills. The first, Nong Man, refers to a naturally forested hill, usually 10 to 100 hectares, worshipped by a natural village (called Man); the second, Nong Meng, refers to much larger forested hill, often hundreds of hectares, worshipped by the traditional administrative village or a governed area (called Meng). The traditional Dai people’s practice of the Holy Hills has made a significant contribution to environmental goods and service the local and regional landscapes. Studies show a high concentration of endemic and endangered species in the Holy Hill forests.

**The Hani concepts of village and nature**

The Hani people, with a population of 1.25 million in Yunnan, are originally from the Tibetan Plateau. Ha meaning snow, strong and brave, combines with ni, meaning the people who live in mountains, to create the strong, brave mountain-dwelling Hani. The Hani people migrated from the Hong He, the Red River region of central Yunnan, where they are believed to have practiced irrigated agriculture toward what is now Xishaungbanna more than a thousand years ago. Other members of the same group migrated south, reaching northern Thailand and Myanmar early in the eighteenth century. Finding the river valleys of the warm, humid, sub-tropical regions already occupied by other groups, the Hani learned to practice shifting cultivation in the still vacant uplands.

During a long history of migration and readaptation to their new environment, a group of people, including zoema, biemo and nipa, who hold sacred and ecological knowledge about nature, have played a key role for cultural identity and continuity. The Hani are a patrilineal clan. The village chief (zoema) is normally a hereditary position but may be selected by a group of knowledgeable and well-to-do village men. The role of the village chief was traditionally imbued with legal authority and religious functions, but never as an absolute ruler.

The biemo is the natural encyclopedia of Akha society. He is the knowledge keeper of the genealogy tree, or all male ancestors of the clans, generally committing over sixty generations to memory. He recites all the ancient oral traditions about the origin of the Hani or Akha, the history, the migrations, the plant and animal cycles, etc. He is in charge of precisely establishing in the Akha calendar the date of every festival. He plays the role of an intermediary between the spiritual world of the ancestors (the past) and this world (the present). The Biemo also holds ceremonies for funerals. Every village has a Zoema village head but not necessarily a Biemo. Sometimes several villages share one Biemo, or there are several Biemos in a village.

Another knowledgeable person is the Nipa or shaman. Most are women who have been designated by the spirits to fulfill this role. She learns from her dreams and can easily communicate with the spirit world. If somebody gets sick, Nipa is asked to diagnose the illness and communicate with spirits for treatment, often combining rituals, dancing and medicinal plants. The Nipa and Biemo have a close relationship. If somebody is sick because they have broken a natural law, or taboo, the Nipa will identify whose spirit the person has violated. As she does not have the power to ask for pardon from the spirit, the Biemo performs the rituals for facilitating dialogue with the spirit.

The Hani village is surrounded by a village protection forest (pucang) of several hundred meters divided into a human lived place (pucang) and nature (nonhuman) world.
(baolcang), with a village gate entrance (lanlkang). There is another gate to the ancestors living area (laogqiml), the cemetery forest. The super-nature, mother of the Earth, governs all gods related to agriculture, who live in the village sacred forest (milsan-sanqqu) and is often represented by a big, strong and long-living tree (such as oak, Castanopsis mekongensis or Ficus religiosa), called dragon trees by some Hani people. In a lucky day every June, a big ritual is held by zoema with participation of an adult male representative from each family. Hani people believe that different spirits have their own habitats, such as wetlands, lakes, strange stones, and particular trees (e.g., Terminalia myriocarpa).

The Hani people in Yunnan have a tradition of preserving forests in the mountainous areas where they live. As an ethnic group primarily living in southern Yunnan and bordering northern parts of Myanmar, Lao, Vietnam and Thailand, the Hani have kept harmonious relations with their natural surroundings for many centuries. According to their cultural beliefs, humans are a part of the natural world in which everything has its own spirit, and most of the spirits reside in certain forests. Human activities, like collecting forest products, hunting, and cutting trees in these forests are taboo for the villagers.

Tibetan sacred mountains and concepts of space
As high mountain dwellers, mountain worship is the most characteristic cultural belief and practice of Tibetan peoples. The spread of Buddhism on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau imbued their sacred mountains with new or even greater significance. There are different kinds of sacred mountains for Tibetan people. Songre is a little peak designated for the spirit, with small shrines but no residential houses, worshipped only by a small village or even one or two families. Nieda/Reda (some use them interchangeably) is a whole mountain body, bigger than Songre, and shared by larger village communities within a small region. People may live on it, though some Tibetan communities view such a mountain as very spiritually sensitive, believing that it is especially propitious to supplicate such a sacred location with prayers. Nieqian/Niere is a holy mountain highly regarded by the Tibetan community at large. It refers to the whole mountain from bottom to top. Nieqian is a respectful term such as Nieqian Qumalangma (Mt. Everest) and Khabadkapo. Reincarnated Buddhist Lamas purposely make sacred mountains cover a very large area because they believe that the bigger the area, the less likely it is that spirits will be disturbed. There is also evidence of concern among some Lamas that a rapid opening of pristine nature to tourism development might result in destruction of such sacred places. Some even go as far as designating religious names to new sites in an attempt to prevent their being disturbed.

In Deqen Tibetan Prefecture of northwest Yunnan, local Tibetans believe that the land, animals and people are governed by mountain gods residing on the peaks. There are over 15 sacred mountains found in the region of different sizes and religious power. Among them, the Meli Snow Mountain (Khabadkapo), the highest peak in Yunnan, is considered sacred by not only local Tibetans but all believers of Mizong (Kagyupa, one of the most important branches of Tibetan Buddhism). The Khabadkapo, with a height of 6740 meters above sea level and a total area of over 200 square kilometers, is ranked as one of the eight most important sacred mountains in the Tibetan Plateau. Each year, thousands of believers from Yunnan and other parts of the Tibetan region make pilgrimage to the mountain.

The Tibetan people have named and classified space into internal and external worlds. The internal world or human community is the permanent residence and village, including each named piece of land, each named house built on the named piece of land. The people adopt the name of the house as the family name. The external world, outside of the house or house walls, consists of arable lands, wild lands, lakes and forestlands with plants, trees, fish, rocks, wildlife, etc. The sacred objects, such as incense burning stands, pagodas, and mani stone piles, function as sacred places for Tibetans to have dialogue with life and spirits in the external world. The graveyard is considered a transitional place between earthly life and transcending into the “world of the death,” the external world controlled by spirits. Those spirits associate with each other to form a group of mountain gods represented by mountain ranges centered on Mt. Khabadkarpo. Tibetans believe that these mountains can transform into human beings and vice versa. The concept of reincarnation pervades the Tibetan worldview. The key to good reincarnation into the next life is to undertake pilgrimages to commonly recognized sacred spaces; Mt. Khabadkarpo is considered the most holy in northwest Yunnan.

Yi people’s polytheistic beliefs
The Yi people have a large population living traditionally in the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi of southwest China. They believe that human beings and wildlife are offspring of the snow clan. The offspring of the snow clan had twelve categories, including six categories with blood (frog, snake, eagle, bear, monkey and human) and another six without blood (grass, trees, firs, etc.). Everything is divided into male and female: big trees are female, small trees male, big stones female and small stones male, big mountains female and small mountains male. All beings, human and non-human, have a soul or spirit. These communicate with and respect each other. In the Chuxiong Yi Prefecture of central Yunnan, local people believe that humans survived through calamities with the help of these plants, while others are associated with gods or spirits. Recent surveys conducted in this prefecture by Liu and others have
indicated that at least 21 plant species are generally worshiped and protected by local Yi communities due to various cultural beliefs. Historically, the Yi people evolved and practiced a polytheistic religion, which is an integration of Shamanism, Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. In their practice, 1) everything has a soul, whether it is tree, water, stone, wind, star or animal; 2) nature is worshiped and there is a super-nature of those gods (as of land, mountain, and tree) that have power to control human beings; 3) the tiger is considered to be the original totem for Yi people; 4) reproductive fertility is also worshiped, for example, in the alder tree (Alnus nepalensis) due to its plentiful seeds; 5) ancestors are worshipped, as is the god of Earth (which is next to ancestors in terms of importance), and sacred places and sacred forests.

Most rituals are held by the biemo, the Yi priests. The mosaic of sacred sites of Yi people forms an important cultural landscape, which contributes to local environmental goods and services.

Conclusion
Sacred spaces are found in different geographical scales and are worshipped and protected by different social groups, households, villages, religious sub-groups, ethnic groups and regions. The designation of sacred mountains has profound cultural and political implications while it also serves an important ecological function. Sacred mountains, besides serving as locations of deities connecting the human with the spiritual world, this life and the next, deliver products and perform ecological functions and services. Most obvious to local people as well as to outsiders is as sources of streams, benefiting both humans and wildlife. Old people often recall seeing collections of wildlife, such as deer and parrots, gathering along the streams. Therefore, good water-source forests, even when located outside of sacred forests, still receive extra protection from nearby villages and are usually designated as sacred sites closed to fuel-wood harvesting.

The relationship between natural resources and people has been forged within religious, moral, cultural, political, economic, and ecological boundaries. Respect for these boundaries by different communities and social groups resulted from historically accepted formal and informal rules and norms. For the Dai people of Xishuangbanna, their forest-oriented philosophy and the religious basis of traditional life have instilled a respect for forests, plants, and wildlife. Old people often recall seeing collections of wildlife, such as deer and parrots, gathering along the streams. Therefore, good water-source forests, even when located outside of sacred forests, still receive extra protection from nearby villages and are usually designated as sacred sites closed to fuel-wood harvesting.

Further Reading
Liu, Hongmao, Xu Zaifu and Xu Youkai. “The Role of the Traditional Beliefs in Conservation Plant Diversity: A Case Study in Xishuangbanna, Southwest China.” In


See also: Chinese Traditional Concepts of Nature; Confucianism; Daoism; Mongolian Buddhism and Taimen Conservation; Polytheism; Sacred Mountains; Sacred Space/Place; Southeast Asia; Tibet and Central Asia; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Traditional Ecological Knowledge among Aboriginal Peoples in Canada.