Maasai (Tanzania)

Historically, Maasai were semi-nomadic pastoralists who lived in Tanzania and Kenya. Nature and its elements have been and remain central to Maasai religion, even as Maasai lives and livelihoods have changed in response to colonialism, nationalism, development interventions, Christian evangelization, education and other processes. These processes have also exacerbated regional, social, cultural and thus religious variations among and within Maasai sections (large territorial groupings). Moreover, although many Maasai, in addition to keeping livestock, now cultivate small farms, work for wages, and pursue other modes of economic diversification, most still remember and uphold their long-standing history and ideals as semi-nomadic pastoralists. Their close customary relationship to and dependence on the environment for their sustenance and social reproduction was expressed in many aspects of their religious beliefs and practices, including: their concept of their deity (Eng’ai), their sacred symbols and colors, their holy mountains and trees, their attitudes toward wild and domestic animals, and their prayers and praise songs. Although many of their beliefs and practices continue today, this entry is written in the past tense to acknowledge the changing circumstances of their lives.

Maasai believed in one deity, Eng’ai (also spelled Ng’ai, Nkai, and Enkai), who was understood primarily, although not exclusively, in feminine terms as the divine principle that created and nurtured life on Earth. Eng’ai also meant “rain” and “sky,” and was addressed through many metaphors such as Noompees (“She of the growing grasses”) and Yieyio nashal inkilani (“My mother with the wet clothes”) that emphasized wetness, darkness, motherhood and growth, and thus reinforced the association of Eng’ai with fertility and femaleness. According to most myths and proverbs, Eng’ai resided in and was one with the sky, and had a dialectical relationship of mutual dependency with enkop, the land or the Earth: Kerisio Eng’ai o Enkop, “Eng’ai and the Earth are equal.” Together, Eng’ai and humans, the Sky and Earth, created and nurtured life; there was a necessary unity and complementarity between them. All natural phenomena, especially those concerned with the weather, were attributed to the interventions of Eng’ai and read as expressions of divine power and judgment – rain as blessing, drought as displeasure, thunder and lightening as anger, rainbows as approval, and comets as portents of bad luck.

Both Eng’ai and humans had the ability, through their actions, to alter their relationship. This agency is evident in one set of myths that describe how, because of human jealousy and greed, Eng’ai ended the flow of cattle to Maasai from the sky and distanced (but did not separate) herself from them. The dynamic relationship between humans and Eng’ai also shaped how Maasai understood and invoked Eng’ai in their daily lives, and the almost complete lack, at least historically, of a distinction between the sacred and secular worlds. Although most Maasai men tended to pray only on special occasions to Eng’ai, Maasai women prayed throughout the day, from the early morning when they milked their cattle to their last waking moment at night. During their prayers, women sprinkled some milk on the ground for Eng’ai, raised their arms and heads to the sky (sometimes clutching grass in their hands), and entreated her for continued protection, preservation, expansion and prosperity of the family and herds. Women also sang prayer and praise songs to Eng’ai when gathered together for chores and rest, or at ceremonies and celebrations. Through their prayer and songs, women maintained a daily, ongoing relationship with Eng’ai, and took responsibility for ensuring that Eng’ai bestowed continued blessing and bounty on their households.

In addition to the constant intercessions of women, Maasai also tried to influence and understand Eng’ai’s actions through their iloibonok (oloiboni, singular), male ritual leaders who had the powers of prophecy and divination. According to Maasai myths, iloibonok were direct descendants of Eng’ai, beginning with the first oloiboni, Kidongoi, who became the apical ancestor of their sub-clan, Inkidong’i. They were always seen as “outsiders” to some extent, and their powers were viewed with a mixture of fear and fascination. There were major iloibonok who had superior powers of prophecy and divination and large followings. They were called upon to appeal to Eng’ai in times of great crisis such as prolonged drought, warfare, or sickness, and some even served as Maasai “chiefs” during the early colonial period. In contrast, the minor iloibonok usually did not prophesy, but performed divinations at the request of individual clients to investigate more mundane, everyday problems such as the occasional ill health of people and livestock. The primary method of divination was to shake stones and other objects from a gourd or horn, then analyze them with the complex Maasai numerology of auspicious and inauspicious numbers. Iloibonok also provided charms...
and amulets for various purposes such as to ward off sickness or to ensure the success of a cattle raid by junior men.

Finally, in times of crisis and concern, Maasai men and women held elaborate ceremonies to entreat Eng’ai for help. These usually involved prayer and praise song-dances, the ritual slaughter, roasting and consumption of cattle, the brewing and imbibing of honey beer, and special prayers using elements of nature associated with Eng’ai such as milk, honey, grass, and water (discussed below).

As pastoralists, Maasai were concerned with having sufficient grass and water to feed their livestock. Not surprisingly, then, grass and certain liquids (milk, spittle and honey) featured in their religious entreaties, practices and ceremonies as near-sacred symbols of and gifts from Eng’ai. Grass was a sign of welcome and peace. It was often held in the hands, tied as a sprig to one’s clothing, placed in the neck of a calabash, or draped on someone’s shoulders as they were being blessed. Milk, like cattle, was a gift from Eng’ai, and symbolically associated with women (who produced, processed and controlled its distribution) and fertility. It was sprinkled on the ground at the beginning of each milking, on humans from a calabash with grass in its mouth for blessing, and offered to family, visitors, and even strangers. To spit on a person (usually their head or hands) or a thing (such as a gift) was to bless them or express reverence. New-borns were spat on constantly, elders spat into the hands of juniors to bless them and wish them well, and ritual participants often spat a mixture of milk and water on whoever was being honored, prayed for, or blessed. Honey signified the sweetness of Eng’ai, and honey beer was also often spat on people as a sign of blessing.

These and other natural elements were associated with and expressed in the meaning and use of colors in the Maasai religious cosmology. White (of milk, animal fat, and the white cumulus clouds that appear after a rain storm) was a sign of blessing, peace and contentment. White chalk was often used to draw special protective designs on the face, legs or torso of certain ritual participants; they were also sometimes anointed with animal fat. Maasai spoke of Eng’ai Naibor, the “White God,” or the “God with the white stomach.” A stomach was white and content from being filled with the milk that was Eng’ai’s gift to Maasai. White beads also featured in Maasai beadwork.

Black (of the dark rain clouds) was a particularly holy color. Black cloth used to be worn by fertile women, and is still worn by people in holy or liminal states (such as newly circumcised boys and girls, or prophets and prophetesses) to entreat Eng’ai’s special protection. Eng’ai was referred to as Eng’ai Narok, the “Black God,” when she was being helpful, kind and compassionate. Black bulls were required for the sacrifices made at major age-set ceremonies and the dark blue beads (which were categorized as black) worn by married men and women marked the sanctity of their marital bonds. Charcoal was often used to make symbolic black markings and designs.

The meaning of red (of blood and ochre) was somewhat contradictory. On the one hand red clothing (formerly leather rubbed with ochre, now red cloth) and skin (achieved by rubbing a mixture of ochre and cow fat) were considered a distinctive marker of Maasai ethnic identity. As the color of blood, red signified kinship, life and vitality. On the other hand, red could express anger and destruction. When the actions of Eng’ai were seen as harmful and vengeful, she was called Eng’ai Nanyokie, the “Red God.” Red was also associated with fire and the relentless heat of the dry season. Red for Maasai was, it seems, the color of power, which had the potential to be creative or destructive, or even both – destroying in order to create. Finally, many other nature-associated colors – the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, the orange of the sun – appeared in meaningful patterns and arrangements in the elaborately beaded ornaments, jewelry and clothing crafted by Maasai women. Thus Eng’ai was sometimes referred to as Parmuain, “Multicolored God.”

Maasai also symbolically associated trees and mountains with Eng’ai. Trees and shrubs were called olcani, which also meant “medicine.” The roots, bark and leaves of certain trees and shrubs were used as medicine to treat specific diseases. Since disease and death, like health and birth, were derived from Eng’ai, the power of olcani to heal and protect was understood as a divine intervention mediated through human knowledge and practice. In addition, oreteti, a species of parasitic fig tree, was believed to be particularly sacred. The oreteti tree spreads and grows by lodging its seeds in the cracks and crevices of other trees. As a result, its branches extend in all directions and its many roots entangle and hang down in coils from the host tree from sometimes-great heights. Oreteti often have water in their trunks and fissures, its sap is a reddish color, and its leaves contain a milky white substance. Maasai saw these vertical thickets as links growing from the sky and Eng’ai down to the Earth and humans; they were therefore considered holy places where people could be closer to Eng’ai. Maasai men and women visited these holy trees either alone or in groups to pray, worship, and plead to Eng’ai for rain and other blessings. The leaves, bark and branches of the oreteti tree were also used in religious ceremonies and prayers.

Certain mountains also figured in Maasai religious cosmology and stories as the homes of Eng’ai or her descendants. Oldoinyo Orok, the “Black Mountain” (Mt. Meru) was recognized as holy and a home of Eng’ai. Oldoinyo Olbor, the “White Mountain” (snow-capped Mt. Kilimanjaro), was sometimes referred to as the home of the first human, Naiterukop (“She who creates the earth”). Oldoinyo Leng’ai, the “Mountain of God,” is an active volcano that still spouts smoke and ash in the Rift Valley.
Its occasional eruptions signaled the wrath of Eng’ai. Nonetheless, ritual delegations of barren Maasai women (olamal), led by elder men, regularly visited Oldoinyo Leng’ai to pray to Eng’ai to bless them with children.

As part of their reverence for nature as Eng’ai’s creation, Maasai also treated wild and domestic animals with respect. Cattle, of course, were prized as the primary source of food, social worth and Maasai identity. Each animal was distinguished by name, based on its colors, size, and other physical features. Goats and sheep were also marked as individuals, although with less fanfare and prestige. Historically, Maasai did not hunt or eat wild animals, including the large herds of wildebeest and zebra that roasted their plains. Lions, however, were hunted by junior men for protection and prestige. Snakes were usually left alone, and there was a belief that certain very prominent men returned as black pythons. Birds were never eaten, but certain species were killed so that their bodies and feathers could be used to create elaborate headdresses for newly circumcised boys.

Nature and all of its elements, as described above, were reflected and expressed in Maasai prayers and praise songs. As an example, take a woman’s dance song (1998: 226–7).

In conclusion, Eng’ai’s relationship to humans was seen in and understood through nature. Since Maasai had no concept of the afterlife, they focused on leading good and holy (sinyati) lives in the present so that Eng’ai would be pleased and bless them with good health, children and cattle. The focus of their religious beliefs and practices was thus on maintaining the complementarity between Eng’ai and humans, between the sky (or heavens) and the Earth, and correcting – through daily prayers and ritual ceremonies – any transgressions or disturbances that occurred to this relationship.

In recent years, this relationship has been more difficult to maintain as the tremendous, cumulative losses of land and key water supplies to game parks, commercial agriculture, and settlers have converged with a long history of inappropriate development interventions to undermine pastoralism as a viable livelihood and to force Maasai to seek other ways of supporting themselves. Moreover, these colonial and post-colonial interventions have also privileged Maasai men as economic and political actors, thereby disenfranchising Maasai women from their historical rights and powers. In response to these dislocations, many Maasai women have embraced Christianity as a way to enhance their spiritual powers and critique what they perceive as the increasingly materialistic, secular and amoral practices of Maasai men. Maasai religious beliefs and practices have been encouraged, modified, disparaged, or prohibited, depending on the denomination and attitude of the missionaries and church involved.

Dorothy L. Hodgson

Further Reading


See also: Sacred Mountains; San (Bushmen) Religion; and adjacent, San (Bushmen) Rainmaking; Volcanoes.

Maathi, Wangari – See Kenya Green Belt Movement.
MacGillis, Sister Miriam – See Genesis Farm.

Macy, Joanna (1929–)

One of the outgrowths of social and environmental activism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been a reevaluation and reappraisal of the various religious traditions of the world. “Engaged Buddhism” utilizes Buddhist concepts such as co-dependent co-arising (in Sanskrit, Pratîtya Samutpâda), compassion (karunā) and wisdom (prajñâ) as a basis for ethical action in the world. Many Buddhist practitioners understand their relationship with the natural world in terms of interconnectedness and mutuality of being. These ideas are used to describe both experiences of unity with the natural world, as well as to provide an impetus for action on behalf of it.

Joanna Macy, one of the founders of the Institute for Deep Ecology, combines Buddhist teaching and practices with General Systems Theory in workshops and classes that she leads around the world in order to facilitate personal and social transformation, especially in regard to environmental issues. She promotes what she refers to as the “Great Turning,” from an industrial growth society, to a life-sustaining civilization.

Through working with Tibetan refugees, she became acquainted with Tibetan Buddhist monks and was formally introduced to Buddhist thought and practice. After returning to the United States, she pursued and completed a doctoral degree in which she explored the relationship between Buddhist notions of interdependence and mutual causality and systems thought (Macy 1991). She spent several years in Sri Lanka where she worked with Theravadan Buddhists of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement who were engaged in efforts to help rural villagers to become communally and ecologically self-sustaining. Buddhist insights and practices are found throughout her work.

Macy began to do what she came to call Despair and Empowerment work as a result of her involvement with the Nuclear Freeze and Disarmament campaigns of the 1960s through 1980s (Macy 2000). She developed group exercises and role-playing scenarios that were designed to enable people to acknowledge and express their pain, grief and despair for the world and then to harvest that passion and compassion to bring about the changes necessary to diminish or rid the world of those things which threatened it. Her book, Despair and Power in the Nuclear Age, as well as its revision (with Molly Young Brown), Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World, grew out of this work and contains a collection of these exercises and role-playing scenarios, as well as an explanation of some of the principles behind Despair and Empowerment work.

In Macy’s work, the notion of interconnectedness is what enables persons to feel pain for the world and one another, and is also the source of strength for addressing the crises facing the world:

I have been deeply inspired by the Buddha’s teaching of dependent co-arising. It fills me with a sense of connection and mutual responsibility with all beings. Helping me understand the non-hierarchical and self-organizing nature of life, it is the philosophic grounding of all my work (Macy, www.joannamacy.net).

In Buddhism, the practice of meditation is to break through the illusions the mind creates about the nature of reality. Macy’s work builds upon this idea through the use of role playing and exercises designed to help workshop participants to see the world as it is, not only its interconnectedness, but also the destruction of the environment and species extinctions. Her work is designed to cut through the illusions constructed by the individual mind and society that serve to deny the reality of the environmental crisis. But that practice is an engaged practice, addressing environmental and other social issues:

The vitality of Buddhism today is most clearly reflected in the way it is being brought to bear on social, economic, political, and environmental issues, leading people to become effective agents of change. The gate of the Dharma does not close behind us to secure us in a cloistered existence aloof from the turbulence and suffering of samsara, so much as it leads us out into a life of risk for the sake of all beings. As many Dharma brothers and sisters discover today, the world is our cloister (Macy, www.joannamacy.net).

Macy uses the imagination in the form of role playing and rituals in order to look closely at the actual conditions of the world. This use of the imagination is a way to move people beyond mental numbness to experience the reality of the global environmental situation. One example of this is the Council of All Beings, which Macy and John Seed developed to ritually reconnect human beings with other species and natural forces.

Craig S. Strobel

Further Reading


Magic

Magic is, broadly speaking, an attempt to violate the natural exchange of energy. It seeks an operative shortcut, the getting of more for an output of less. In this sense, the practice of magic appears to be anti-nature – especially the “demonic” magic of the medieval grimoires that seeks to suspend the laws of nature and accomplish superhuman ends. Traditionally, magic represents a category of attempts to tamper with the natural flow. In this sense, it has an affinity with the efforts of technological engineering and civilization’s wish to tame or harness the natural world as a resource for exploitation.

But if magic represents a violation of the natural order, a transgression of the linear laws of equal exchange, contemporary science’s emergent theories of complexity argue that the cosmos is more alinear than linear. Complexity theory studies retrodictively the processes by which something becomes more than merely the sum of its constituent parts. In like manner, as magic seeks to generate power through ritual and spells, in principle the word when correctly spoken becomes more than itself. In the fullest sense, the word expresses the physical being or essence of the thing it describes. Consequently, magic may be thought of as a “science of the word” – a notion that appears to its fullest in the logos prologue to the gospel of St. John.

Another understanding of magic, apart from illusion for the purpose of entertainment, posits it as the production of effects in the world by means of invisible or supernatural causation. It may also be considered as action that is based on belief in the efficacy of symbolic forms. But once again, the essential idea remains the notion of securing something of greater value in exchange for something whose intrinsic worth is less. This need not necessarily involve the supernatural. For instance, for a nominal outlay of electrical energy and telephonic financial charges, two people on different sides of the planet can engage in conversation and as such may be considered involved in an act of magic. This allows recognition of how technology itself represents a violation of the natural law of exchange. For the Greeks, technē referred to the “art of craft,” and magic and technology were both the patronages of the god Hermes. As French theologian Jacques Ellul explains, technique is not only a reference to machines but also to “the logic of manipulation and gain that lay behind machines” (in Davis 1998: 144).

In its traditional sense, magic has limited concerns. These include the healing and preventing of disease, the finding of lost or stolen articles, identifying thieves and witches, gaining vengeance and the warding off of evil influences. An early distinction was made between magic and religion – with magic operating by constraint; religion, through supplication. Following a structural-functionalist approach, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) accepted a radical distinction between religion as a communal matter and magic as a non-congregational affair between a practitioner and a client. But Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), following a different line of structural-functional theory, in his A General Theory of Magic (1902), reasoned that magic is indeed a social phenomenon but one that makes use of a universal force or mana, an available spiritual power. In other words, for Mauss, magic or mana refers to the genuine effectiveness of things.

In contrast, and following what Graham Cunningham (1999) considers an emotionalist approach, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) denied Mauss and considered magic not as a universal force but as a power located within the individual magician. It amounts to a substitute technology in primitive society in which scientifically established knowledge is otherwise unavailable. Consequently, for Malinowski, magic is primarily a question of psychology: where knowledge or technology is lacking, it offers psychological relief. Malinowski also distinguished between religion and magic in which the Church is understood as the central community and magic as what exists on the fringes of communal activity. He argued that magical acts are expressions of emotion – particularly emotions that are connected to either possession or powerlessness. Such acts or emotions for Malinowski are in reality mental obsessions.

It is, however, the English anthropologist James G. Frazer (1854–1941), classified within the intellectualist school, who developed the distinction between magic and religion into one of progressive historical stages. For Frazer, magic is part of the earliest level of human development and arises from the human desire to control nature. It is, however, formulated on fallacious understandings of cause and effect. The successive stage of
understanding reputedly develops with the realization concerning the ineffectiveness of magical rites and that the laws of magic do not really exist. Control of nature was then placed under the jurisdiction of supernatural beings (gods or spirits) beyond human control. Frazer called the moment when humanity turns to supplication beings (gods or spirits) beyond human control. Frazer called the moment when humanity turns to supplication of such forces as the beginning of the stage of religion. However, he posits a third stage, that of science, which is marked by the discovery of the correct laws of nature. As an evolutionist, Frazer expected that both magic and religion would cease to exist as science continues to develop.

Frazer argued that the two laws of magic are imitative and contagious. Imitative or homeopathic magic operates according to the “law” of similarity, that is, the belief that like produces like. Results are achieved through mimicry. In contrast, contagious magic is governed by the “law” of contact – the use of materials that have been in contact with the object of magic. Here, we find the belief that people can be influenced even by remote touch. To these two “categories” of magic, Frazer added a third, namely, the use of items that symbolize the intended object.

Another emotionalist discussed by Cunningham in theorizing magic is Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). One of the clearest contemporary articulations of the Freudian position is that of Faber (1996) who insists that magic in the hands of an adult signifies a regression to infantile fantasy. Belief in magic is seen to root in what is considered the “primary narcissism” of the symbiotic stage of individual development. It amounts accordingly to a form of regressive fusion to the time of unconditional love between mother and child. However, in contrast to this psychological approach is that of the symbolists. Mary Douglas, in Purity and Danger (1966), claims that the tendency to dismiss ritualistic sacramental religions as magical and consequently not truly religious is a prejudice that selects the prophetic-Protestant model of inner experience as the paradigm of authentic religiosity. But symbolists consider that magic offers a workable framing of experience in a local context. Nevertheless, modern Western culture has shown an increasing tendency to distrust ritual or symbolic activity of any kind – including magic.

Interest and belief in magic have been present since the beginnings of Western culture. Manuals of magical recipes were formulated in the Middle Ages under the name of grimoires. These sought to conjure demonic entities in order to achieve ends that are beyond ordinary human means. Essentially, grim moiré magic seeks to suspend the laws of nature. This, in turn, developed during the Renaissance into hermetic magic in which a spiritual endeavor was added to the efforts of the magician who now sought to develop an internally personal divine nature. The modern history of magic begins with the late eighteenth century through the rise in Western Europe of dilettante interest in occultism and interaction with Freemasonry as well as the emergence of publicly recognized magical groups. Three literary works became seminal at this time: Ebenezer Sibley’s Celestial Sciences (1784), Francis Barrett’s The Magus (1801), and a work published by Count de Gebelin that connected the Tarot with the Egyptian Book of Thoth. Barrett’s work functioned as the textbook for the group that had gathered around him. It in turn influenced an ex-Catholic seminarian, Alphonse-Louis Constant, who, under the name of Eliphas Levi, published in the 1850s Dogma and Ritual of High Magic, History of Magic and Key of the Great Mysteries that purportedly revived the entire Western magical tradition. Levi invented the terms occultisme (“hidden wisdom”) and haut magie (“high magic”) and claimed for magic both antiquity and potency. He insisted that magic is the only universally valid religion. Levi is responsible for rediscovering both the Kabbalah and the Tarot, and he is a foundational inspiration for Rosicrucians, ritual magicians and contemporary witches.

Levi had adopted the Freemasonic idea that the human race had been created as part of the divine. Consequently, the divine nature is arguably still present and something one can contact – chiefly by going back into the past, foremost to Egypt. In other words, Levi changed the concept of old magic that sought the gods into a search for self-knowledge and self-empowerment. His ideas, along with those of Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism and the magical formulas of Barrett, coalesced with the founding of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the 1880s. This last, under the leadership of Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, who assumed leadership in 1897, developed a ritualistic worldview system of Western magic. The Golden Dawn promoted the Hermetic principle of correspondence between the microcosm as the human being and the macrocosm as the universe. Its standard practices involved invocation (the “calling down” into the self of a cosmic force) and evocation (the “calling up” of magical forces from the depth of the self). The Order taught that the trained will is capable of achieving anything, and this led to the contemporary understanding of magic as the changing of consciousness according to will (usually attributed to Dion Fortune). The Golden Dawn’s most famous member was Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) who formulated Thelemic Magic (from Greek thelema “will”).

Most modern magical groups have been inspired from the Knights Templar (a quasi-monastic, magical fraternity formed in 1118 to protect Jerusalem for Christian pilgrims) and the kabbalists (developing from ancient Hebrew sources in Babylon in the early Middle Ages and culminating with Moses de Leon’s thirteenth-century Book of Zohar). A third influence comes through the fourteenth-century tarrochi cards (Tarot). As a system of popular
divination, Levi, Crowley and A.E. Waite combined the Tarot’s modern form with kabbalistic symbolism. Contemporary Western magic seeks the production of desired effects at will through harnessing hidden forces within the universe. Sybil Leek understands magic as the employment of various techniques (e.g., incantations) by which human beings can control and manipulate supernatural agencies and/or the forces of nature to produce a desired effect or result. Magicians and magical groups inevitably employ ritual as a tool to focus the concentration and power of the individual or group. They maintain an essential secrecy or “social invisibility,” employ hidden ancient wisdom, and retain roots in the pre-Christian world.

Implicit in much of the Western magical tradition is an anti-nature bias, the violation of the natural law of exchange or the laws of nature. Magical endeavor can be seen as the human wish to tamper with the natural flow. In principle, it differs little from the manipulation and control of technology – allowing the nature/culture or nature/technology or nature/magic divide that has been articulated by Freud in his Civilization and Its Discontents. Nevertheless, a counter-tradition can be traced again to the Middle Ages that understood “natural magic” in distinction to “demonic magic” – including the manipulation of people through curses (i.e., black magic). Consequently, opposed to demonic magic of both nefarious and exalted ends is the domain of natural magic – essentially, operation within the “laws of nature” as they are found and encountered. Del Rio, in his Disquisitiones Magicae of 1606, explained natural or physical magic as none other than knowledge of the deepest secrets of nature. In the Middle Ages, natural magic was essentially the science of the day.

Most traditional magical practice descends from Neoplatonism as a system of spiritual development that can be traced through the Martinists, the Illuminati, the Rosicrucians, the Freemasons and the Golden Dawn. In contrast, many modern-day Witches and neo-pagans do not link magic with the supernatural. It is instead viewed primarily as a series of techniques that alter consciousness in order to facilitate psychic activity. Magic has become a psychological endeavor rather than a supernatural one. Along with modern-day ceremonial or thelemic magic(k), a more recent development is that of Chaos Magick (Peter Caroll, Phil Hine) that employs a chaos paradigm and the individual image to obtain a state of gnosis.

In the cultural matrix of the West, the magician can assume the role of magus, wizard, sorcerer, thaumaturge and, more recently, shaman. The etymological origins of these various designations and their different historic trajectories allow us to understand a variety of different emphases. The magus or magician per se is concerned with power and its development vis-à-vis people, nature and spirit. The wizard, by contrast, pursues wisdom or knowledge rather than controlling or manipulating force in and of itself. The sorcerer is a “caster of lots,” which he or she engineers through techniques of enchantment or incantation. In many respects the sorcerer or enchanter is similar to the shaman – both engage with the other-world and its denizens, and both may do “battle” with spirit beings. But the shaman’s pursuit is always social and ultimately on behalf of his or her grounding community. With the sorcerer, on the other hand, magical work is solitary and motivated by self-interest. It is the thaumaturgist, however, who, as a “worker of wonders” is less the seeker after power, wisdom, control or conflict but essentially after the miraculous. And in contrast to techne or achieving psychological states of mind, thauma or the miracle reveals a further dimension of magic and one that opens it to the natural that may not automatically be apparent with the technological.

While the Greek term thauma is of obscure origin, its English equivalent “marvel, miracle” and cognates (“smile,” “mirror” and “admire”) reveal an underlying dynamic of appreciative reflection. The miraculous is not a denial or transgression of the natural but its mirror image. It introduces the possibility that the magical can be an integral part as well as counterpart to nature rather than an operative that contravenes fundamental natural laws. And as the etymological root behind the “miracle” complex suggests, magic as the miraculous engenders “smiling”; it is an occasion for “laughter.”

Michael York

Further Reading


Magic, Animism, and the Shaman’s Craft

Animism and Perception

Although the term “animism” was originally coined in the nineteenth century to designate the mistaken projection of humanlike attributes—such as life, mind, intelligence—to nonhuman and ostensibly inanimate phenomena, it is clear that this first meaning was itself rooted in a mis-apprehension, by Western scholars, of the perceptual experience of indigenous, oral peoples. Twentieth-century research into the phenomenology of perception revealed that humans never directly experience any phenomenon as definitively inert or inanimate. Perception itself is an inherently relational, participatory event; we say that things “call our gaze” or “capture our attention,” and as we lend our focus to those things, we find ourselves affected and transformed by the encounter—the way the blue sky, when we open our gaze to it, reverberates through our sensing organism, altering our mood and even the rhythm of our beating heart. When we are walking in the forest, a particular tree may engage our awareness, and if we reach to feel the texture of its bark we may find that our fingers are soon being tutored by that tree. If the bark is rough and deeply furrowed our fingers will begin to slow down their movements in order to explore those ridges and valleys, while if the trunk is smooth, like a madrone, even the palm of our hand will be drawn to press against and caress that smooth surface. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his classic work, Phenomenology of Perception, suggests that the primordial event of perception is always experienced as a reciprocal encounter between the perceiver and the perceived, an open dialectic wherein my sensing body continually responds and adjusts itself to the things it senses, and wherein the perceived phenomenon responds in turn, disclosing its nuances to me only as I allow myself to be affected by its unique style, its particular dynamism or active agency.

Merleau-Ponty’s careful analyses of perception revealed, contrary to our common ways of speaking, that the perceiving self is not a disembodied mind but rather a bodily subject entirely immersed in the world it perceives. His later work underscored the reciprocity of perceptual experience by pointing out the obvious (yet easily overlooked) fact that the eyes, the visual organs by which we gaze out at and explore the visible field, are themselves entirely a part of that field; they have their own colors, like the color of the sky or the grass. Similarly, the hands with which we touch things are entirely a part of the tactile field that they explore—since, of course, the hand has its own textures, its own smooth or rough surfaces. Hence, when we are touching another being, feeling the texture of a tree-trunk, or caressing a boulder with our fingers, we may also, quite spontaneously, feel our hand being touched by that tree, or our fingers felt by that stone. Similarly, when we step outside in the morning and gaze across the valley at a forested hillside, if we attend mindfully to the vision we will sense our own visibility, will feel ourselves exposed to those trees, perhaps even feel ourselves seen by that forested hillside. Perception, according to Merleau-Ponty, is nothing other than this reciprocity, this mutual reverberation and blending in which the surrounding terrain is experienced by me only to the extent that I feel myself caught up within and experienced by those surroundings.

Such a description neatly echoes the discourse of many indigenous peoples, such as the Koyukon people of central Alaska, who claim that they live “in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes” (Nelson 1983: 14). Oral, indigenous peoples from around the world—whether hunters or rudimentary horticulturalists—commonly assert that the land itself is alive and aware, that the local animals, the plants, and the earthly elements around them have their own sensitivity and sentience. They claim that the earthly world we experience also experiences us. And hence that we must be respectful toward that world, lest we offend the very ground that supports us, the winds and waters that nourish us.

If the phenomenological study of perception is correct, however, then these claims need not be attributed to a “projection” of human awareness onto an ostensibly inanimate and objective world; they are simply a way of speaking more in accord with our most direct and spontaneous experience of the perceptual cosmos. Far from being a distortion of our actual encounter with the material world around us, the animistic discourse of so many indigenous, place-based peoples is likely the most practical and parsimonious manner of giving voice to the earthly world as that world discloses itself to humankind in the absence of intervening technologies.

When the natural world is perceived not from the spectator-like position of a detached or disembodied intellect, but rather from an embodied position situated entirely within that world, one encounters no aspect of that world that is definitively inert or inanimate. “Animism” remains a useful term for this highly embodied, and embedded, mode of perception. In this sense, “animism” may be said to name a primordial mode of perception that admits of no clear distinction between that which is animate and that which is inanimate. Rather, every phenomenon that draws our attention is perceived, or felt, to be at least potentially animate. Each perceived thing has its own rhythm and style, its own interior
animation. Everything moves – although, clearly, some things move much slower than other things, like the mountains, or the ground underfoot.

A short, haiku-like poem by Gary Snyder neatly illustrates this style of awareness:

As the crickets’ soft, autumn hum
is to us
so are we to the trees
as are they
to the rocks and the hills.

Each entity in this poem has its own dynamism, its own rhythm – and yet each rhythm is vastly different, in the pace of its pulse, from the others. Nevertheless each entity is also listening, mindful of the other rhythms around it.

To such an embodied, and embedded, perspective, the enveloping world is encountered not as a conglomeration of determinate objects, but as a community of subjects – as a relational field of animate, active agencies in which we humans, too, are participant.

**Magic and Shamans**

Such an understanding of the animistic style of perception common to indigenous, oral cultures is necessary for comprehending the vital role played by shamans, the indigenous magic practitioners endemic to such place-based cultures. For if magic awareness is not the exclusive attribute of humankind – if, indeed, every aspect of the perceivable world is felt to be at least potentially alive, awake and aware – then there is an obvious need, in any human community, for individuals who are particularly adept at communicating with these other shapes of sensitivity and sentience. The shamans are precisely those persons who are especially sensitive and susceptible to the expressive calls, gestures and signs of the wider, more-than-human field of beings, and who are able to reply in kind. The shaman is an intermediary, a mediator between the human community and the more-than-human community in which the human group is embedded. This wider community consists not only of the humans, and the other animal intelligences that inhabit or migrate through the local terrain, but also the many plant powers that are rooted in the local soils – the grasses, and herbs (with their nourishing and medicinal characteristics, their poisonous and mind-altering influences), the trees with their unique personalities, and even the multiform intelligence of whole forests; it consists as well of the active agency and expressive power of particular land forms (like rivers, mountains, caves, cliffs), and of all the other elemental forces (the winds and weather-patterns, the radiant sun and the cycling moon, storm clouds and seasonal patterns) that influence, and effectively constitute, the living landscape.

The magic skills of the shaman are rooted in his or her ability to shift out of his common state of awareness in order to contact, and learn from, these other powers in the surrounding Earth. Only by regularly shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the shaman hope to enter into relation with other species on their own terms; only by altering the common organization of her senses is she able to make contact and communicate with the other shapes of sentence and sensitivity with which human existence is entwined. And so it is this, we might say, that defines a shaman: the ability to readily slip out of the collective perceptual boundaries that define his or her culture – boundaries held in place by social customs, taboos, and especially the common language – in order to directly engage, and negotiate with, the multiple non-human sensibilities that animate the local Earth.

As a result of his or her heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations of the wider community of beings, the shaman tends to dwell at the very periphery of the human settlement, at the very outskirts of the village or the camp. The indigenous magician’s acute sensitivities often render him unable to dwell, or even linger, in the midst of the human hubbub; only at the edge of the community is he able to attend to the exigencies of the human world while living in steady contact with the wider, and wilder, field of earthly powers. The shaman is thus an edge dweller, one who tends the subtle boundary between the human collective and the wild, ecological field of intelligence, ensuring that that boundary stays a porous membrane across which nourishment flows in both directions – ensuring that the human community never takes more from the living land than it returns to the land, not just materially, but with prayers, with propitiations, with spontaneous and eloquent praises. To some extent, every adult in the human community is engaged in the process of listening and attuning to the other presences that surround and influence daily life. Yet the shaman is the exemplary voyager in the intermediate realm between the human and more-than-human worlds, the primary strategist and negotiator in any dealings with these earthly powers. By his constant rituals, trances, ecstasies, and “journeys,” the shaman ensures that the relation between the human and more-than-human realms remains balanced and reciprocal; that the living membrane between these realms never hardens into a static barrier shutting out the many-voiced land from the deliberations of the human collective.

Further, it is only as a result of continually monitoring and maintaining the dynamic equilibrium between the human and the more-than-human worlds that the shaman typically derives his or her ability to heal various illnesses arising within the human community. Disease is commonly conceived, in such animistic cultures, as a kind of disruption or imbalance within a particular person, and yet the source of this disequilibrium is assumed to lie not in the individual person but in the larger field of...
relationships within which that person is entwined. A susceptible person, that is, may become the bearer of a disease that belongs not to her but to the village as a whole. Yet the ultimate source of such community disequilibrium will commonly be found in an imbalance between the human community and the larger system of which it is a part. Hence the illnesses that beset particular individuals can be healed, or released, only if the healer is simultaneously tending, and “healing” the relative balance or imbalance between the human collective and the wider community of beings. The shaman’s primary allegiance, then, is not to the human community, but to the earthly web of relations in which that community is embedded – it is from this that his or her power to alleviate human illness derives – and this sets the local shaman apart from most other persons.

The term “shamanism” is regularly used, today, to denote the belief system, or worldview, of such cultures wherein the shaman’s craft is practiced. Yet this term is something of a misnomer, for it implies that the person of the shaman stands at the very center of the belief system and of the culture itself; it suggests that the shaman is revered or perhaps even worshipped by the members of such a culture. Yet nothing could be farther from the case. We have seen that the shaman is quintessentially an edge-dweller, a marginal figure, one who straddles the boundary between the culture and the rest of animate nature. It is not the shaman who is central to the beliefs of that culture, but rather the animate natural world in all its visible and invisible aspects – the expressive power and active agency of the sensuous and sensate surroundings. And thus the worldview of such a culture is not, properly speaking, “shamanistic,” but rather “animistic.” It is first and foremost in animistic cultures – cultures for whom any aspect of the perceivable world may be felt to have its own active agency, its own interior animation – that the craft of the magician first emerges, and it is in such a context that the shaman (the indigenous magician) finds his or her primary role and function, as intermediary between the human and more-than-human worlds.

The Contemporary Magician

Finally, a few words should perhaps be said, here, about the role of the magician in modern, technological societies. After all, the modern conjuror’s feats with rabbits, doves, or tigers hearken back to the indigenous shaman’s magical rapport with other species. Indeed, virtually all contemporary forms of magic may be shown to derive, in various ways, from the animistic mode of experience common to all of our indigenous, hunting and foraging ancestors – to the experience, that is, of living within a world that is itself alive. Moreover, it is likely that this participatory mode of sensory experience has never really been extinguished – that it has only been buried beneath the more detached and objectifying styles of perception made possible by a variety of technologies upon which most moderns have come to depend, from the alphabet to the printing press, from the camera to the computer. In the course of our early education, most of us learn to transfer the participatory proclivity of our senses away from the more-than-human natural surroundings toward our own human symbols, entering into an animistic fascination with our own humanly generated signs and, increasingly, with our own technologies. And as we grow into adulthood, our instinctive yearning for relationship with an encompassing sphere of life and intelligence is commonly channeled beyond the perceptual world entirely, into an abstract relation with a divine source assumed to reside entirely outside of earthly nature, beyond all bodily or sensory ken.

Yet even a contemporary sleight-of-hand magician still makes use of our latent impulse to participate, animistically, with the objects that we perceive. Magicians – whether contemporary sleight-of-hand conjurors or indigenous tribal shamans – have in common the fact that they work with the participatory power of perception. (Perception is the magician’s medium, as pigments are the medium for a painter.) Both the modern sleight-of-hand magician and the indigenous shaman are adept at breaking, or disrupting, the accepted perceptual habits of their culture. The indigenous shaman practices this in order to enter into relation and rapport with other, earthly forms of life and sentience. The modern magician enacts these disruptions merely in order to stare, and thereby entertain, his audience. Yet if contemporary conjurors were more aware of the ancient, indigenous sources of their craft (if they realized, for instance, that indigenous shamans from many native cultures already used sleight-of-hand techniques in their propitiatory and curative rituals), then even these modern magicians, too, might begin to realize a more vital, ecological function within contemporary culture.

In an era when nature is primarily spoken of in abstract terms, as an objective and largely determinate set of mechanisms – at a time when eloquent behavior of other animals is said to be entirely “programmed in their genes,” and when the surrounding sensuous landscape is referred to merely as a stock of “resources” for human use – it is clear that our direct, sensory engagement with the Earth around us has become woefully impoverished. The accelerating ecological destruction wrought by contemporary humankind seems to stem not from any inherent meanness in our species but from a kind of perceptual obliviousness, an inability to actually notice anything outside the sphere of our human designs, a profound blindness and deafness to the more-than-human Earth. In such an era, perhaps the most vital task of the sleight-of-hand magician is precisely to startle the senses from their slumber, to shake our eyes and our ears free from the static, habitual ways of seeing and hearing into which
those senses have fallen under the deadening influence of abstract and overly objectified ways of speaking and thinking.

Yet perhaps such magic is also, now, the province of all the arts – the province of music, of painting, of poetry. Perhaps it falls to all our artists, today, to wield their pigments and their words in such a way as to loosen the perceptual habits that currently keep us oblivious to our actual surroundings. In any case, the craft of magic is as necessary in the modern world as it was for our indigenous ancestors. For it is only by waking the senses from their contemporary swoon, freeing our eyes and our ears and our skin to actively participate, once again, in the breathing cosmos of wind and rain and stone, of spider-weave and crow-swoop and also, yes, the humming song of the streetlamp pouring its pale light over the leaf-strewn pavement, that we may have a chance of renewing our vital reciprocity with the animate, many-voiced Earth.

David Abram

Further Reading
See also: Anarchism; Animism; Animism – A Contemporary Perspective; Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Eco-Magic; Hundredth Monkey; Radical Environmentalism; Snyder, Gary.

Maimonides (1135–1204)

Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimun, also known as Rambam) is arguably the premier philosopher and theologian of Jewish history. As one of the most influential thinkers, Jewish, Christian or Muslim, of the medieval period, not only in theology but also in medicine and law, the ecological profundity of his work, long overlooked, is only beginning to be understood. Maimonides, uniquely in Jewish thought, challenged the primacy of humanity within the order of creation, asserted that there is complete equivalence between human and animal emotions, and believed that creation as a whole is the only dimension of being which has intrinsic value.

In his most important work, The Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides suggested a model of the cosmos that is parallel to the Gaia hypothesis. Maimonides admonished his reader, “Know that this whole of being is one individual and nothing else,” adding that the whole of creation is “a single being which has the same status as Zayid or Omar,” in other words, endowed with a heart and a soul (1:72, 184). In keeping with Aristotelian cosmology, Maimonides emphasized that all of the spheres of the heavens were “living beings, endowed with a soul and an intellect” (2:4, 259), yet with respect to the entirety of being, all the other spheres were seen by him as mere organs of the whole, while the outermost sphere was the heart of the cosmos.

For Maimonides, the idea that the universe was an organic whole was a fundamental scientific fact. This, according to Maimonides, led to a direct understanding of God’s relation to the world, for “[the One [God] has created one being” (1:72, 187; see also 2:1, 251). Maimonides believed that in order to develop the intellect “in God’s image,” one needed to understand this truth scientifically by studying the more-than-human world.

I have already let you know that there exists nothing except God, may He be exalted, and this existent world, and that there is no possible inference proving his existence, may He be exalted, except those deriving from this existent taken as a whole and from its details (1:71, 183).

Maimonides’ emphasis on natural theology laid the foundation for the development of scientific method in the West. In contrast with the Kalam school and with most theologians of his time, Maimonides asserted that “demonstrations . . . can only be taken from the permanent nature of what exists, a nature that can be seen and appre-
hended by the senses and the intellect” (1:76, 231; see also 1:71, 179).

For Maimonides, this perspective also had direct metaphysical and ethical implications, for “the individuals of the human species, and all the more so the other species, are things of no value at all in comparison with the whole [of creation] that exists and endures” (3:13, 452). His ideas about the wholeness of creation profoundly influenced the Church, especially Thomas Aquinas, as can be seen in Summa Theologica (1a, q.47, art.1, 1:246) and Summa Contra Gentiles (part 1, ch. 64, 3:213, paragraph 10; also 3:212, paragraph 9).

Maimonides rejected the idea that humanity was the final end of creation, rejecting also the idea that other creatures exist to serve human pleasure: “It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes . . .” (3:13, 452).

In this respect, his thought contrasts sharply with most other medieval Jewish thinkers, like Sa’adyah Ga’on or Bachya ibn Paquda. Maimonides held that this was the view delineated within Genesis itself, explaining the word “good” used in chapter one of Genesis to mean that each creature has something like intrinsic value (3:13, 453). The phrase “very good” (Gen. 1:31), indicates the overwhelming value of “the whole.”

Maimonides arrived at this interpretation after concluding that there can be no telos for creation: “[E]ven according to our view holding that the world has been produced in time, the quest for the final end of all the species of beings collapses” (3:13, 452). In a later chapter, he derived a remarkable conclusion from this idea: “[T]he entire purpose [of God’s actions] consists in bringing into existence the way you see it everything whose existence is possible . . .” (3:25, 504). This formulation, fundamentally congruent with Spinoza’s cosmology, is also compatible with those who understand evolution to be “directed” toward diversity.

Maimonides held that animals and humans were equal in their capacity to feel and imagine. This understanding was integral to his interpretation of the commandments:

It is forbidden to slaughter [an animal] and its young on the same day, this being a precautionary measure to avoid slaughtering the young animal in front of its mother. For in these cases animals feel very great pain, there being no difference regarding this pain between [humanity] and the other animals. For the love and the tenderness of a mother for her child is not consequent upon reason, but upon the activity of the imaginative faculty, which is found in most animals just as it is found in [humanity] . . . (3:48, 599; see also 1:75, 209 and 2:1, 245).

Some modern interpreters have downplayed this passage by emphasizing another passage where Maimonides states that the prohibition against causing pain to animals is meant to create good habits in people (3:17). However, he is clear in that passage as well that compassion is enjoined for individual animals. In general, and in contrast with other philosophers and theologians, Maimonides minimized the differences between humanity and other animals. Maimonides also explained that instrumental reason by itself merely makes human beings into very dangerous animals (1:7, 33). He further taught that the instruction to “dominate” in Genesis 1 was neither a commandment nor an imperative, but merely a description of human nature (3:13, 454).

For Maimonides the uniqueness of human nature is found in the capacity to apprehend the divine. This is humanity’s perfection (1:1–2, 23–4) which only a few individuals reach. Yet even this quality, along with the “hylic intellect” (1:72, 190–1), makes human beings “merely the most noble among the things that are subject to generation,” since the spheres and the heavens far surpass humanity in their capacities (3:12, 443).

Much in Maimonides is also problematic for contemporary thinkers. As an Aristotelian, Maimonides had a strongly negative attitude toward the sense of touch (2:56, 371; 3:8, 432–3), which is incompatible with the phenomenological approach to the Earth that is taken by many eco-philosophers. In the same vein, he rejected imagination as inferior and espoused an intellectual elitism that remains controversial. Nonetheless, his rejection of anthropocentrism and espousal of a holistic cosmology are starting points for any eco-theology based on the biblical traditions. As we say in the world of traditional Jewish study, “From Moses [the prophet] to Moses [Maimonides], there is no one like Moses.”

David Mevorach Seidenberg

Further Reading
See also: Animals; Animals in the Bible and Qur’an; Aquinas, Thomas; Holism; Judaism; Spinoza, Baruch.

Makapansgat Cobble

What can be regarded as the world’s oldest known “art object” was found in 1925 in a cave at Makapansgat, South Africa. This small waterworn cobble of ironstone was clearly brought into the site from some distance away, and one can only assume that the Australopithecine (a type of fossil hominin) who did this around three million
years ago was attracted not only by the cobble’s reddish color – red is the color most attractive to both apes and humans (as was shown by Desmond Morris’ experiments with Congo, the chimpanzee who liked to paint) – but also and especially by its entirely natural resemblance to a human face: one side has two symmetrically placed small cavities in it, like a pair of sunken eye-sockets, above a simple mouth. This “face” was in no way artificially manufactured, but its accidental resemblance to a face is so striking that it seems certain the object was noticed and brought back to a dwelling place as an important possession. This was a giant step for hominids – apparently they were seeing a face that was not a face, they were responding to an image, they were indulging in a primitive form of symbolism. The discoverer of the cobble, Wilfred Eitzman, a schoolmaster, speculated that it might have been “the god of these early people” or “their god or fetish.”

In most primates, a direct stare denotes self-confidence and the possible prelude to an attack by an aggressive individual, so that monkeys become disturbed when they are stared at or even just presented with drawings of two eyes. Chimpanzees have been known to avoid looking at a toy with large black eyes, while gorillas see the twin discs of binoculars as a threat. In other words, the face pattern with two staring eyes has specific meanings. Where humans are concerned, it is known that up to the age of three months, an infant has a tendency to smile when presented with a full human face, even that of a stranger, and especially by its entirely natural resemblance to a human face.

In experiments, copies of the Makapansgat cobble have failed to elicit any significant response from apes; but apes are not Australopithecines, and since even chimpanzees have been observed to wear blades of grass and to paint parts of their bodies with white clay, as well as to hoard objects and carry single stones for several days, one can hardly doubt that Australopithecines were capable of similar behavior and much more. It can never be proved that they saw a face in the Makapansgat cobble, but the balance of probability is surely that this stone was indeed seen as significant, since it was brought into the site; and that significance is most likely to have come not only from its color and shape, but also and primarily from its natural resemblance to a human face.

Paul G. Bahn

Further Reading
See also: Art; Paleolithic Art; Paleolithic Religions; Rock Art (various).
Mbiririwi – The Sacred Rainmaking Drum

Mbiririwi – literally the drum of good tidings – is a sacred drum that was fundamental to the practices of rainmaking in the central Malawi rain shrine system.

There are a number of accounts of the origins of the drum. Almost all agree that it originally belonged to the BaTwa – the former Pygmy inhabitants of central Africa. Some say that it was taken from the BaTwa by force in battle, others that it was found lying near the sacred pool of Malawi a few kilometres from the shrine of Msinja. That it is extremely old is beyond question.

Mbiririwi is a cylinder-shaped double-ended drum. It is made of wood and its tympanums are made from monitor lizard skin (Varanus sp.). The monitor skin is symbolically important: the creature is associated with and shares the name of the supreme god – Chiuta. It is believed to live in the sky above the clouds and its falling to Earth brings thunder, lightning and rain. Half way between the tympanums is a hole that is closed with a plug. The sides of the drum are decorated with geometric designs that are not understood today. The designs echo those in the BaTwa rock paintings of the area.

The traditional keeping place for mbiriwiri was a special hut at the Msinja rain shrine, in central Malawi. In this it was stored resting on two poles and covered with dark (ideally black) cloth. Each year it was covered with reddish oil. The drum was only taken out of the shrine to be beaten at the start of the rainmaking ceremony or for repairs. Only a special functionary called Tsang’oma – meaning the beater of the drum – was allowed to handle the drum. Another functionary, Kapanga Banda, was charged with providing new monitor lizard skin for the drum when needed.

To start the rainmaking ceremonies, Tsang’oma (which is here an inherited title and does not refer to a traditional healer) would be called upon to beat mbiriwiri. The ceremonies would then last some days and if rain had not fallen by the end of the ceremonies then Tsang’oma would be blamed. He would be taken to a rock called Dzanzi several miles from the Msinja shrine. His teeth were rattled inside it. The rattle is likened to the name: mbiriwiri.

When Ngoni invaders sacked the shrine at Msinja in the 1860s it is recalled that the Tsang’oma of the time fled with Mbiririwi to a place inside Mozambique. While it was in Mozambique it seems that he had a squabble and this led to the drum being thrown down onto a large flat rock and broken. The man who broke the drum was executed. The drum was repaired and the teeth were replaced inside it. Today the drum is kept at a new shrine at a village called Tsang’oma, in Malawi. Today the drum is still kept on poles and covered in a dark cloth. It is never brought out into the open as it is said that the drum has become too powerful, and that if it were taken out there would be no rain.

B.W. Smith

Further Reading


See also: Pygmies (Mbuti foragers) & Bila Farmers of the Ituri Forest; Rock Art – Batwa/Pygmys (Central Africa); Rock Art – Chewa (Central Africa); San (Bushmen) Rainmaking.

until another woman appeared at Msinja who was clearly possessed, who uttered strange prophesies and who could answer a set of secret questions. No Makewana could ever marry, as Makewana was the wife of God (Chiuta). When God came down to Earth to visit Makewana he would do so in his snake manifestation: Thunga. It is believed that Thunga most often took the form of the python and therefore pythons were kept in baskets within the shrine of Msinja. Once a year, at the culmination of the girl’s puberty rituals (chinamwali), Thunga would ceremonially sleep with Makewana and thereby bring fertility to the young maidens. In this ceremony a man named Kamundi Mbewe would stand in for Thunga. Kamundi also could never marry. Makewana could never become pregnant as to bear a human child would prove her infidelity to Thunga. Any Makewana who became pregnant was therefore killed.

Makewana’s hut was near the Msinja spirit shrine. The spirit shrine was a small round hut made out of grass that is said to have been a replica of the original shrine at Kaphrintiwa. Between the hut of Makewana and the spirit shrine was the hut of the sacred drum: Mbiririwi. Around this sacred area was a large village made up of a network of functionaries who all serviced the shrine. It is said that no one at Msinja planted crops or worked so as to provide for their own needs; their sole job was to service the shrine. Their needs were provided for out of the tribute that was brought to the shrine.
Måldhåris of Gujaråt

Måldhåris were bovines, also a semi-tribal pastoralist. The Måldhåris are primarily based in the arid to semi-arid regions of Sauråshtra and Kutchchh, including the protected Gir wildlife sanctuary area, in the state of Gujaråt, India. Mål connotes precious wealth; here, it is implied for the wealth of livestock – mainly buffaloes, cows, sheep, goats, camels, and horses – and dhåri means the one who has, keeps, or raises such wealth. There are nomadic, semi-nomadic, and settled (non-nomadic) Måldhåris. They have been known for raising high-quality and drought-resistant breeds of buffaloes and cows for their milk and its by-products.

The Chåran, the Rabåri, the åhir, the Bharwåd, the Mér, and the Kåthis are the major Hindu Måldhåris. There are also a few Muslim Måldhåris, such as the Makaråni and the Siddi, groups who earn their livelihood as Måldhåris. They all have diverse beliefs, myths, rituals, and festivals. Thus, the Måldhåris are primarily an occupational community rather than a singular religious or cultural group. However, it is this occupation and the resulting kinship, tangible and intangible relationship with livestock, spatial and biophysical transactions with place, traditional ecological knowledge, and myths that seem to tie them together. These themes also help us understand the relations between their religion (beliefs and values) and ecology.

While a large percentage of the Måldhåris engaged with livestock rearing are illiterate, most of them, especially those living in the Gir wildlife sanctuary’s forest area and its fringes, are very knowledgeable about the region’s natural patterns and processes. Sharing of skills, stories, and social norms takes place through intergenerational interactions around daily chores and simple acts of leisure like sitting and conversing around bonfires in late evenings. Everyone in the household plays a significant role in subsistence activities and maintaining cultural traditions. Through such lifestyle they have developed a strong bond with their mål, family, kin, other Måldhåris, the land, and the plants and animals found in their local area. Such interactions and the resulting bond often translates into reverence for both their cherished mål and nature, upon which their own way of life closely depends.

Different Måldhåri groups share many religious traits. There are references of them in the Hindu volumes of the Vedas, the Purånas, the Ramåyana, and the Mahåbhåråta. They mainly worship and attend rituals and festivities...

Further Reading


See also: Kaphirintiwa – The Place of Creation (Central Africa); Pygmies (Mbuti foragers) & Bila Farmers of the Ituri Forest; San (Bushmen) Rainmaking.
related to the Goddess Durgā or Bhawānī who is worshipped in many different forms of local deities. They also worship Lord Krishna and, especially celebrate with grandeur his birth-date, Janmāshātami. In religious and cultural festivals they perform with devotional songs, group dance called garbā, and couple-group dance of rās. Their prayers and aarti (devotional offering) also acknowledge their reverence and gratitude for Mother Earth. For many Måldhåris bhoom or bhoomi (the land, Earth) is a very dear entity. They worship it; they understand that their socio-economic worth is dependent upon it.

Myths and stories surround the origins of this people. It is commonly believed that the ancestors of the Måldhåris came to Gujarāt and particularly to the Saurashtra region along with Lord Krishna when he moved from Vrindāvan-Mathurā area (in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India) and established his rule with Dwārkā as its capital (in the western tip of the Saurashtra peninsula). This is significant since many Måldhåris worship Lord Krishna (whose was also known as Gopāl – the protector and keeper of cows) as their thākur (lord or figurehead) or kul-guru (clan or ancestral teacher). Another story claims that the Måldhåris, as cattle herders, precede the times of Lord Krishna. It explains why they also worship Lord Shiva and Goddess Pārvati (or Bhawānī). According to this myth, Lord Shiva and Goddess Pārvati needed a keeper for their camel. Goddess Pārvati created a person out of clay under a Samadi (a Prospis) tree and Lord Shiva gave life to it and was called Sāmod. He was married to an angel named Rai and their descendents are the Måldhåris, particularly the Rabāris.

The underlying significance here is the deep-rooted, life-giving association with land and the nurturing capacity of trees or vegetation with the mythical overtones of gods, goddesses, and angels. Such myths provide a basis for reverence and continued faith in nature and power of supreme beings in giving life and sustenance. Such faith and values are then celebrated by the community in the folk-dances, especially garbā and rās, performed with gaiety and music around an idol of the goddess during the nine-night festival of Navarātri. Such faith in and connection with nature are also reflected in daily religious performance (pujā) or family events around the year. Some Måldhåris, especially the Chārans, are bards and folk-singers. They share much of their wisdom and experience through folklores and folk-songs. Many of these expressions also have mythological and spiritual dimensions revealing their veneration for nature and God.

As Hindus they follow the lunar calendar and associate their religious practices with the full or new moon and changing seasons. Such association with temporal cycles also link them to the cosmic events that help them remember their place and role in the larger universe. Based on their experience with natural and human-created calamities and change, they believe that the ecological crisis results from lack of faith and immoral ways. At the same time they also believe that in this impermanent world, only their good karma, the fruits of well-performed duties, will go with them (their soul) when they die. Such grand perspectives are often manifested in their reverential attitudes and ethical behavior toward land, animals, people, and life.

From cultural celebrations and rituals to social traditions and economic practices they link their māl, the land, and gods or goddesses in a very intimate and often sacred manner. Often, they are seen as one and the same. What the Måldhåris believe from a “religious” point of view is often reflected in their views on nature and its quality. In a study on the Gir’s resource management issues and landscape quality, when asked about their views on nature, they typically described “Nature” as mother, their “very own soul” and acknowledged that “everything” is due to her. They are especially captivated by the Gir’s natural beauty and other values which, in turn, add to their respect for the land and attachment to their way of life. Many Måldhåris often pay respect to smaller shrines, trees, rocks, and some water-bodies of religious and cultural significance. A notable aspect of this relationship is their view that nature’s diversity is key to their very survival and emotional bond with the place. This is often manifested in their folklores as well as daily rituals. Such bonding needs to be understood better as it may prove to be vital for nature conservation.

All these rich cultural, social, and spiritual traditions and beliefs do not necessarily reduce the issues that the Måldhåris engaged with pastoral activities today face. They are similar to other pastoralists like the Gaddis in the lower Himalayas of North India or the Maasai pastoralists of East Africa. With increased focus on industrialization and urbanization, harsh climatic patterns, financial debts, and lack of insurance or extension facilities, their way of life is being marginalized. Many Måldhåris continue to abandon their traditional pastoral vocation and, willingly or otherwise, adjust and survive in an urban-industrial economy that is alien and often degenerating to them. This often leads to social and kin disintegration. Women and children usually get the rough end of the deal.

The world is facing many resource problems as well as spiritual perturbation, and these seem to be linked. The microcosmic life and times of pastoralists in general and the Måldhåris in particular reflect this reality. The Måldhåris’ way of life may also show a way out. Pastoralism brings these people in close contact with structure and functions of nature and nonhuman living beings. Time, intergenerational interactions, community interdependencies, stories and myths, rituals and festivals, disasters, uncertainties, simple joys, majestic settings, temporal rhythms, and relationship with the local and regional landscapes are the forces that hone their very body, mind, and soul. Therefore, a unique worldview and
nature religion emerges that leads to ecological knowledge and valuable, environment-related skills.

Shishir R. Raval

Further Reading
See also: Hinduism; India; San (Bushman) Religion.

Malthus, Thomas Robert (1766–1834)

Thomas Robert Malthus was an Anglican clergyman, educator, and essayist whose ideas have exerted a powerful influence on Western thought in a number of areas, most notably demography, political economy, and biology. His most famous and controversial work, Essay on the Principle of Population (first edition, 1898), is considered one of the seminal sources of classical economics and strongly influenced other disciplines as well, notably evolutionary biology. At the heart of Malthus’ thought was a vision of nature that emphasized inevitable limits and persistent suffering, and as a clergyman he was obliged to contemplate the religious implications of this harsh conclusion. He did so by developing a distinctive theodicy, grounded in utilitarian thought, as well as an ethics of moral restraint aimed at controlling population pressures. And while some of Malthus’ views reflect the parochial concerns of his church and era, his general interest in the relationship between nature and religion resonate in contemporary debates about environmentalism, economic development, and human values.

Malthus’ most famous and enduring idea, the population principle, starts from two simple postulates. First, that food is necessary to human existence. Second, that the “passion between the sexes” stays at a constant level throughout human history. Recognizing that sexuality quickly begets children that must be fed, Malthus quickly builds to his famous principle – “the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man” (1976: 21). Put in mathematical terminology, “population, when unchecked, increases in a geometric ratio ... [s]ubsistence increases only in an arithmetic ratio” (1976: 118). Critics charged that Malthus did not have the statistical evidence to warrant such a precise mathematical equation, but his main point was well taken. Any population is naturally beset by a “struggle for existence” as various individuals and groups vie for limited resources. In human societies, Malthus argued that the principle of population frustrated any attempts at a comprehensive amelioration because population would always be racing ahead of society’s ability to nourish itself. For even the most civilized nations, especially at the lower strata, life was beset by “checks” – disease, vice, starvation, natural disasters, and other forms of misery – that painfully brought population back to levels that could be fed. Malthus thus opposed the optimistic hopes of reformers such as William Godwin, who felt that society free of crime, war, poverty, and disease could be achieved.

While Malthus believed that the population principle was a universal natural law, he recognized that its severity varied somewhat according to historical circumstances. In some societies, it brought on spectacular cycles of boom and bust, whereas in others it might only impact the lower classes during severe economic downturns. Ultimately, he hoped that his Essay would help decision-makers (government officials, parents, educators, etc.) put policies into place that would soften and reduce the checks, even though he felt very strongly that no society could completely eliminate them.

Nature then, for Malthus, was essentially composed of contradictory forces that vexed human existence (later thinkers like Darwin would apply this reasoning to all organic existence). On the one side was an expansive tendency linked to sexual reproduction that increased populations. On the other was limiting tendency (a finite food supply, the diminishing capacity of land to produce food) that led to deprivations, competitive struggle, and for many, early mortality. Small wonder that Thomas Carlyle would dub the classical economics that built from Malthus “the dismal science.” At the most fundamental level, nature guaranteed suffering and pain that even the most civilized and orderly societies could not eliminate.

The prescriptions to reduce suffering that Malthus offered made him a controversial and often reviled figure. He asserted that direct efforts to help the poor (welfare payments, etc.) were in vain because recipients tended to use the resources to have more children who ultimately would be vulnerable to the checks. Instead, he argued that the English poor laws should be reduced or eliminated and that “moral restraint” (sexual abstinence) ultimately would be a better curb to the population principle because it addressed the root of the problem.
Malthus and Religion

Malthus was educated during an era when many prominent British natural historians were Anglican clergymen. Although some of his early teachers came from dissenting traditions, his primary education (at Cambridge) and career (as a country minister in Surrey) were steeped in Anglican orthodoxy. Malthus’ thought was strongly marked by the era’s natural theology that argued “through nature up to nature’s God.” In the most general sense, natural theologians maintained that the natural world was the harmoniously and intelligently designed masterwork of a benevolent God.

But how could one reconcile the pain and suffering that extend from the population principle with the “power, goodness, and foreknowledge of the Deity”? Especially now that the scope of natural evil had been enlarged to include all populations, all societies? Malthus was much troubled by this problem and devoted two chapters of his Essay and later writings to developing a theodicy that encompassed the population principle.

According to Malthus, “The original sin of man is the torpor and corruption of the chaotic matter in which he may be said to be born” (1976: 118). Furthermore, life was to be considered

the mighty process of God ... for the creation and formation of mind, a process necessary to awaken inert, chaotic matter into spirit, to sublimate the dust of the Earth into soul, to elicit an ethereal spark from the clod of clay (1976: 118).

Thus the pressure articulated by the population principle was part of a great series of “excitements and impressions” by which the Creator, acting through “general laws;” awakened “sluggish existence.” At the level of human society, the cruel “checks” so seemingly incongruent with theism were the very means by which a benevolent God elicited thoughtfulness, preparation, diligence, moral excellence, compassion, and ingenuity – in short, those habits of mind and behavior that secured improvement. Ultimately, the rational thought and exertion developed to alleviate the “partial evils” brought by the population principle resulted in an “overbalance of good” that benefited society.

Malthus linked his theological views to a utilitarian philosophy holding that a good society maximizes pleasure and eliminates pain for the greatest number. Like other utilitarians, Malthus saw the gratification of passion and desire as the foundation of human happiness, and thus entirely natural and good, except when overindulged. Typical of Anglican utilitarianism of his era (which had little regard for birth control), Malthus felt that the greatest scope for pleasure would be secured by restraining and/or redirecting passion until sufficient resources could be secured to safely enjoy the pleasures of life, chiefly, family and moderate consumption. Thus throughout his writings, Malthus endorsed moral restraint, “dictated by the light of nature and expressly enjoined by revealed religion,” as the best means of addressing the population principle (1826: IV, 2, 19).

Anti-Malthusianism

Malthus’ ideas, particularly after they were used to legitimate the rolling back of legal reforms designed to ameliorate the condition of the poor, became anathema to a variety of religious and political movements that championed the less fortunate. Radicals like Marx and Engels argued that Malthusianism was not so much a natural principle as a political ideology that inhibited the development of a more just, caring, and egalitarian society. According to this perspective, poverty and want were not rooted in “natural” conditions but in the greed and political shortsightedness of the more privileged classes. Liberal responses were more complicated. While most joined the radicals in rejecting Malthus’ pessimism about comprehensive social amelioration, many, following the lead of John Stuart Mill, acknowledged Malthus’ basic diagnosis of the human condition. Thus many liberals differed from Malthus only insofar as they held out greater hopes for increasing the production of food and/or regulating population through birth control and family planning – thereby tempering and perhaps eliminating the cycles of misery that plagued human history.

The relationship of religion to these anti-Malthusian trends is varied and complex. Many of the radicals dismissed traditional religion (revealed and supernatural) and Malthusianism as allied forms of reactionary political ideology – and perhaps could look to the popularity of Malthus among socially conservative Anglican clergy as suggestive evidence of this alliance.

Others, especially Christian socialists and religious liberals, insisted upon the rejection or modification of Malthusian pessimism in the name of ethical duties to help the poor and reduce human suffering. Likewise, much anti-Malthusian sentiment emerges out of the loosely codified faith in progress that emerged during the Enlightenment. Thus in various utopian schemes and economic philosophies, poverty and want are not permanent social conditions but technical problems that can be solved or market inefficiencies that can be corrected – thereby transforming a suffering world into a place of peace, plenty, opportunity, and surplus.

Malthusianism and Environmentalism

With the rapid increases in human population over the course of the twentieth century (and projections for the twenty-first) many economists, environmentalists, and policy specialists, especially in the “limits to growth” camp, have revisited Malthus’ ideas and used them to frame contemporary discussions of overpopulation and
food supply. Although these efforts generally include a strong emphasis on birth control and eschew explicit theological content, they are often infused with a moral and prophetic urgency, reminiscent of Malthus. For example, American biologists Paul and Anne Erlich have repeatedly argued that the world is overpopulated and that food production in many regions is already at full capacity or environmentally unsustainable. They contend that the basic solutions to this potentially disastrous situation will entail a fundamental shift in human values and attitudes, especially those that concern reproductive behavior, economic growth, technology, the environment, and conflict resolution. In a more general way, writers like John Rohe and Garrett Hardin use Malthus to introduce contemporary discussions of natural limits, overpopulation, economic planning, and environmental management.

Malthus’ ideas are still widely discussed and debated by environmentally concerned people of diverse religious faiths. Perhaps his views remain current because his population principle framed some of the central concerns of human existence in ways that are easily grasped, yet powerful in their implications. The causes of human suffering, the limits to population, the consequences of sexuality, and the hope for a just and sustainable economic system all find articulation in his writings. A conscientious prophet for some, a reactionary ideologue for others, Malthus continues to cast a long shadow over discussions of religion and nature in the modern era.

Lisle Dalton

Further Reading
See also: Abortion; Breeding and Contraception; Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism; Fertility and Abortion; Fertility and Secularization; Judaism and the Population Crisis; Population and Consumption – Contemporary Religious Responses; Population, Consumption, and Christian Ethics.

Mammy Water (West Africa)
Mammy Water is a Pidgin English name with different spellings (e.g., Mami Wata, Mammywater, Mami Wota, etc.) in West African coastal areas and near major bodies of water (e.g., rivers, lakes, and lagoons). The people refer to their highly localized divine waters as Mammy Water (e.g., Nigeria’s late Igbo novelist, Flora Nwapa, and the Yoruba musician and artist, Twins 77). A scholar, Mrs. Chinwe Achebe, wife of the Nigerian author and Nobel Prize nominee, Chinua Achebe, asserted that:

Nne Mmiri is a female deity with variants of local names, e.g., Idemili … With the arrival of Europeans to this part of the world, “Nne Mmiri” became known as “Mami Wata” – a translation which enabled the local inhabitants to communicate the existence and exploits of this female deity to foreigners (Achebe 1986: 15).

Foreigners were slow to accept the notion of a water goddess. The conquerors of territories were more interested in the Earth than in water. Together with the English name, a chromolithograph depicting a woman with long hair and snakes was introduced in the 1920s, spread quickly, gained popularity and is commonly identified as Mammy Water. Furthermore, native artists utilize the foreign image, an African icon, in their own renderings of water spirits, adding to an academic controversy.

The Academic Discourse on Mammy Water
A psychiatrist indebted to Judeo-Christian and Freudian interpretations of the icon’s snakes first explored connections between Mammy Water and mental illness in Liberia while unaware of indigenous links between Mammy Water and healing. Art historians largely ignored ethnographic detail, focused on the history of art objects, overlooked the existence of local water divinities, and following Salmons’ influential article, speculated on the “cult’s” foreign origins, pointed to the icon’s importation, pondered on European or Indian affinities, and even considered possible New World sources (e.g., Vodun). Some social anthropologists have translated the snake symbolism into Marxist interpretations of socio-economic structures, or interpreted the religious practices as indigenous responses to modernity. Others emphasize African agency, literature, art, cosmology and cultural contexts, taking their clues primarily from African ethnography and meanings of the components: snake, woman, long hair, and color symbolism.

The Python
Mammy Water’s serpents are loaded with Judeo-Christian and European-American gender symbolism. This, in turn, has distracted from alternative views. Comparative and historical studies of myth, ritual, iconography and symbolism...
reveal the snake as an ancient, significant, and recurrent theme, near-universally imbued with polar meanings (e.g., in the primordial snake of Babylon, the Egyptian hieroglyph, *djet*, classic Greek mythology, and Africa where pythons in particular are often linked to creation, mythical origins of the world, and regarded as sacred).

In South-East Nigeria, the python, imbued with religious symbolism, is regarded as a messenger of the gods (e.g., the lake goddess). An avenger of the divine ire, the python punishes an offender in Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1986). A circle represents the python’s association with death, but also circular time, reincarnation and eternity, in a chalk drawing by Palmer, a herbalist and water deity priest of *Eghema*, signaling the impending death of his patient moving to another stage of the eternal cycle of life and death.

**Woman and the Color White**

Africans sometimes say that Mammy Water is “white”, “yellow”, or “very beautiful.” This has encouraged speculations on the foreign origins of not only the icon, but also associated beliefs in *The Spirit of the White Woman*. Mammy Water priests, instead, insist on healing, teaching to dance, and reconciling their clients with custom. The color white has special significance in West Africa: whiteness metaphorically indicates spirit involvement (e.g., in a new-born baby, or a dying person). White chalk cools the possessed mind and the feverish body, is awesome, mysterious, beautiful, and a symbol of femininity.

The color white signals birth and death, the transition from life to death, and vice versa in the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth, delineating circular time. *Nzu*, white limestone/ chalk, found underwater, or white powder, is used in initiation ceremonies involving symbolic death and rebirth, to dedicate a person, or a body, as a medium to communicate with deities, and mark the crossroads between humans and spirits. A priest or diviner’s eyes and the front heads of the congregation are painted white. White chalk is blown to the spirits, sprinkled on the ground in prayers and sacred Nsibidi drawings, and disperses like women leaving their ancestral homes. Both water and whiteness are associated with childbirth, female fertility, transitions, and mobility. White (chalk) is a gift of the lake goddess and her favorite color: she prefers white in costume and sacrifice. Mammy Water’s lightness and the portions of her dress and poster seen as white indicate spirit involvement. Initiates read the icon’s gender and whiteness as “female divine water” – not to be mistaken for a racial feature.

**Red and White**

The white color is significant not only by itself, but also in combination with red. Yellow chalk, *edo*, defined as red, complements *nzu* and symbolizes virility. The combination of red and white in ritual expresses the complementary dualism of male and female, procreative powers, and the ideal balance of divine creation. The desired equilibrium of gender is embodied in divine pairs (e.g., in the shrine sculptures for the river goddess, Ava and her husband, near Nsukka) and expressed in the Igbo proverb, “If something stands, something else stands besides it” (Obioma Nnaemeka, personal communication).

Mammy Water’s dress contrasts red and white, recalling the important theme of complementary gender, ritually symbolized (e.g., in the stark contrast of red blood on white chalk, of yellow and white chalk, and in costume). The combined use of the female icon and a chromolithograph of an Indian deity with three heads representing the male Mammy Water, or the water goddess’ husband, further emphasizes the dualism of male and female.

**Long Hair**

One striking feature of the Mammy Water icon is her long, uncut, unbraided, and wavy hair. Foreigners read racial features into this hairstyle. But in West Africa, unkempt and uncut “long hair” has its own significance. African hairstyles are highly developed and diverse, an essential part of the ideals of feminine beauty and male grooming. Great care is applied to coiffure, an intrinsic part of personal grooming.

Classic African sculptures represent humans as well balanced, composed, and well groomed. Images of humans with wild, long, or uncut hair are rare. Yet, in real life, not everybody is as composed as in artistic imagery. Though rarely represented, people with dreadlocks are known as *Dada* and Ajali in Yoruba and Igbo. Their long hair transcends social norms of controlled beauty and signals danger, disease, death, witchcraft, forces of wilderness, water, or spirit dedication.

Yoruba children with dreadlocks, *Omolokun*, (children of the sea), are considered related to water spirits. The Igbo link a person’s dreadlocks to his destiny and extraordinary state of mind. A *Dada* is thought to be either “mad”, or a “prophet”, in touch with nature spirits outside of human society, often living an unusual life (e.g., as did Sunday, no longer cutting his hair, leaving it long, forever unkempt). More than a mere fashion, *Dada* is an expression of profound existential crisis, physical, emotional, or both, at the brink of death, close to the spirit world, apart from ordinary human life. This may afflict anyone at any time in their life, even a child (e.g., when the river god Urashi reincarnated a baby boy). Wild hair signals wilderness spirit involvement, the opposite of the human civilization and its well-groomed, cut, or shaven hair in men, and braided, plaited, cut, or combed hair in women. Long hair characterizes the water goddess herself.

**Women with “Wild,” Long Hair**

Long, “wild” hair, or dreadlocks have added significance for African women. A young maiden is adored, praised
and flirted with. Adulthood and entry into womanhood mark a shift of ideals of beauty to that of a mature woman, a matron who acts, looks, and is looked at differently from an adolescent girl. This transition is often marked through initiation and a time in the fattening house. The “fattening house” or “fattening room” is a term used in South Eastern Nigeria and other parts of West Africa where large size rather than skinny women idealize traditions of female beauty. The “fattening house/room” refers to a part of female initiation (from girl to woman) whereby a maiden entering the stage of mature womanhood stays in a special hut, or room, for a period of time (e.g., a week) groomed and is given special, rich food, special education and training in housekeeping, female and child healthcare, hygiene, etc., in some societies accompanied by female circumcision (female genital mutilation), and initiation camp.

The move is not easy and not every woman lightly identifies with the ideals of mature beauty, constraints of adult womanhood, marriage arrangements, and other social pressures. Some women are unable to meet gender norms (e.g., are barren, have lost all of their children, suffer, or revolt against life, marriage, a job, training, or other social expectations). They may trade ordinary life for esoteric involvement and dedication to Mammy Water. In Igbo cosmology, changing one’s destiny is possible with the aid of the water goddess who controls the crossroads between life and death, and in turn, requires religious commitment.

Mammy Water’s long hair is synonymous with a particular splendor, the “killer” beauty of Ogbuide, “She who kills with excess,” the gorgeousness of a young maiden, ephemeral as white chalk, yet equally powerful. Mammy Water’s long hair signals fertility, beauty, female power, dedication to divine waters, and often an inability or refusal to live an ordinary life.

The Deities and Their Priesthood

While the icon known as Mammy Water is clearly indebted to foreign influences, there is no doubt in this author’s mind that the deities collectively referred to as Mammy Water are indigenous, highly localized, and historically rooted in African cosmologies.

These divinities customarily have their own hereditary priests (e.g., via entitlement by virtue of seniority in a clan). But despite this prerogative, personal achievement must be qualified. Spirit calling, possession, or vocation are alternate avenues to individuals whose lineage does not own a title. Some have attained their status through vocation or possession, personal misfortune, sickness, healing and initiation. They are locally known as Mammy Water priests/esses.

Mammy Water and the Monotheistic Religions

The ideas of female divinities, multiple gods, divine nature, reincarnation and circular time are alien to the Abrahamic religions, some of which are competing for the souls of the natives. As a result, Mammy Water and other indigenous beliefs and arts are under attack.

Sabine Jell-Bahllsen

Further Reading

Becoming A Woman in Okrika (Nigeria) (video). Filmmakers Library, NYC.
Nevadomsky, Joseph and Charles Gore. “Practice and Agency in Mammy Water Worshipping in Southern
Mandailing People (Sumatra)

The Mandailing people in the northwest island of Sumatra are a clan-based society with an indigenous tradition of representative and consultative governance. They are well known for their ancient tree-bark books, their contribution to modern Malaysian and Indonesian literature as well as their ritualistic music of the Nine Great Drums. They practice an indigenized brand of Islam where customs and customary usage is considered close to religion. Their habitat ranges from well-irrigated highlands with volcanoes to marshy lowlands. Their tropical rainforest is rich in biodiversity with, among others, Sumatran tigers, rhinoceroses, serows and Rafflesia flowers. Their productive economy is based on paddy, rubber, palm sugar, cinnamon, coffee and gold mining. "Mandheling Coffee" is famous amongst coffee connoisseurs today. There are over 300,000 Mandailings in their homeland in Sumatra, with about equal numbers throughout the rest of Indonesia and an estimated 200,000 or so, in Malaysia. The Mandailing homeland is today called the regency of Mandailing-Natal (Madina), in the province of North Sumatra, Indonesia.

The environmental worldview of the Mandailing people is embedded in its language, folklore and cultural heritage. The great epic of the Mandailing people speaks of the elements, the sky and the Earth. The recitation of the epic invokes the Earth, water and habitat guardian. The storyteller employs five different types of languages to transmit the oral tradition, including that of the camphor-gatherers as well as proverbs and maxims.

The epic begins with, “Once upon a time in the primordial past, the plant kingdom flourished and its flowers and fruits were abundant . . .” The symbolism used in the epic which forms the essence of Mandailing ethics and governance point to a way of life that is intimately bound to the forest and natural habitat.

This close connection to the habitat they lived in is also reflected in place-names, which are named after rivers, trees, mountains and such. Names of soil types also reflect an intimate relationship with "nature." For example, a fertile land is called green land.

Mandailing tradition defined the classical role of the Mandailing leader in naturalistic terms. The Mandailing nobleman is likened to the baringin tree, a place of shelter; its spreading roots a place of protection, its canopy a cover for the head. The nobleman’s acute sense of hearing is likened to the rhinoceros.

Traditional Mandailing society has a few key concepts on division of land resources, territoriality and jurisdiction, and the management of resources. Central to these are the notion of a politically unified territory held together by customary law that secures territorial integrity as well as control over resources.

This set-up has a defined territory, citizen and jurisdiction, governed by a council of nobles and elders representing clans, nobility, religious functionaries headed by a chief. The strong connection of a Mandailing to his or her territoriality is testified to by the fact that when two Mandailings meet, they first and foremost ask which territoriality the other is from.

Elements representing the animal kingdom feature prominently in the houses of the nobles and elders called “house with horns” or “house of ornaments.” The horns symbolize the sacrificial buffalo, sacrificed during ceremonial and ritualistic occasions.

In a typical Mandailing settlement, the chief’s dwelling and the council hall are far more important and significant than the mosque. These two customary buildings reflect the status of the settlement as an autonomous entity.

In the chief’s dwelling, the sacred Nine Great Drums are placed. They are played at customary ceremonies such as weddings and installations, and ceremonies to mark the
death of the nobleman. The death of a tiger, described as the king of the forest, is similarly commemorated.

In Mandailing society, the management of the environment is tied to the origin of clans and settlement, social structure, system of land tenure, governance and sense of territory. Mandailing society in the past and up to this day is a rural, agrarian and pastoral society. The main agricultural activity is paddy planting. Ownership of a plot of paddy land is critical to Mandailing social life as it defines one’s standing and status in society.

In the Mandailing perspective, a territorial unit is only complete when it constitutes land and water. The land and water in a settlement is communally owned and its usage has to conform to the customs as well as the sanction of the council of nobles and elders.

The water systems in Upper Mandailing are a feat of traditional water management and engineering. An extensive irrigation system provides for religious, domestic, agricultural and other uses. As such, settlements are strung all along the streams and river banks, traversed by path and canals leading to the paddy fields. One can hear the water flowing twenty-four hours a day in a typical Mandailing settlement.

Mandailing settlements are always located near a spring, stream or a river, which is used for domestic, agriculture, fisheries and religious/ritualistic purposes. Each territorial unit has its own protected forest area, where agriculture, hunting and harvesting of forest products are prohibited. These are usually watershed areas, believed to be where the spirits lived.

Inspired by the traditional concept of protected areas, local communities in the Mandailing homeland have been overseeing the implementation of a river-protection program. The practice prohibits the harvesting of fisheries’ resources close to human settlements for a stipulated period. Implemented in seventy settlements, Mandailing has the largest river-protection scheme in the province of North Sumatra.

The income derived from the harvesting of river resources is used to pay for the development of social facilities such as schools, roads and mosques, providing educational scholarships and administrative salaries, charity toward orphans, the poor and invalids, etc. The income generated by this community-based ecological resource-management program benefits the community directly.

Both mother and child “village republics” are autonomous in implementing their system of governance. The general rule is that the chief of the Nasution clan rules settlements in Lower Mandailing while the nobleman of the Lubis clan rules settlements in Upper Mandailing, but there are exceptions.

The Mandailing nobleman governs in council, in that he acts in concert with his counselors. The nobles and elders jointly carry out their duties and obligations of governance and customary laws, which cover not only social and ceremonial matters such as marriage but also matters of local governance such as division of new paddy lands, rights of water and pastoral land, and so forth.

Although the territorial units were terminated by the Japanese imperial army in the 1940s, which meant that the nobles and elders lost their territoriality and powers to function effectively in Mandailing society, it did not wipe them out of existence, and to this day, the nobles and elders still play a recognized role as arbiters of the customs, although their authority is circumscribed.

Abdur-Razzaq Lubis

Further Reading


Manifest Destiny

Coined by New York journalist John O’Sullivan in 1845, the term “manifest destiny” played an important, conten-
tious role in American territorial expansion during the
nineteenth century, and has had a lasting but equally
fraught impact on American self-understanding in years
since. Components of the idea of manifest destiny have a
long and influential history in the United States, appear-
ing in the guises of religious and political discourse, as
well as in both elite and popular culture before and after
their constellation within O’Sullivan’s editorial work
supporting American annexation of Texas and Oregon. In
its various usages, the term encompasses nature, geo-
graphy and race as key determinants of American values and
institutions. For its proponents, it has typically served to
attribute a sacred quality to American lands, one achieved
through the work of subduing both raw nature and
“inferior” peoples.

The oldest, and perhaps most crucial, component to the
idea of manifest destiny is millennial. Early European
colonists, most consistently the Puritans of New England,
drew frequently on the Bible’s millennial traditions in
order to frame both their own colonizing agendas, and
their view of the new world landscape to which they had
migrated. As a sacred enterprise, their establishment of
Massachusetts settlements was an analogue of the
Israelites’ exodus from Egypt to the land of milk and
honey. The New Canaan, to which God led English
Puritans as his newly chosen people, was an appropriation
of widely embraced English Protestant ideas correlating
the Israelite and English monarchies. Thus the Puritans did
not so much coin the analogy as they deprived England’s
establishment of the analogy’s “proper” use. But while
Church of England expositors had to make biblical
language of the wilderness and the heathen tribes meta-
phors for papal power, the New England Puritans were
able to carve out a Christian beachhead in real wilderness,
“full of wilde beasts and wilde men,” as the Plymouth col-
ony’s first governor William Bradford put it. Just as the
establishment of Israel was necessary for the history of
redemption culminating in the life of Jesus of Nazareth,
New Englanders came to see their own wilderness enter-
prise as crucial to redemption’s second phase. In a kind of
divine balance of history, since – as theologian Jonathan
Edwards calculated – the “other continent hath slain
Christ, and has from age to age shed the blood of the saints
and martyrs of Jesus,” it was reasonable to conclude that
Christians be born there, and being first made meet, shall
from thence be translated . . .” (in Miller 1956: 215). By
contrast, the wilderness itself was often cast as a satanic
realm where the divine aim was subverted.

Following the revolution, America’s millennial role of
playing host to the divine work expanded from providing
the example of right religion practiced in the testing
ground of the wilderness, to encompass the development
of divinely approved political and cultural institutions as
well. When earlier Puritans drew on the Mosaic covenant
to speak about God’s blessing of New England with
abundance, that blessing was dependent upon their main-
tenance of right religious doctrine. In his 1795 Thanks-
giving sermon, preacher Thomas Barnard – with little of
the Puritan’s ground for self-doubt – could simply assert
that “we (Americans) are a people peculiarly favoured of
Heaven.” Such “favour” was most visible in the many
“publick blessings” of prosperity obtained from still-fertile
lands along the Atlantic seaboard (in Tuveson 1968: 31).
The agricultural, industrial and technological achievement
of the early republic over nature – for millennialists such
as theologian Samuel Taylor Hopkins – was evidence of
America’s unique place in the economy of salvation.
Americans, he urged, should expect such divinely spon-
ored advance that in the days to come

a very little spot will then produce more of the
necessities and comforts of life, then [sic] large
tracks do now. And in this way, the curse which has
hitherto been upon the ground, for the rebellion of
man, will be in a great measure removed (in Tuveson

For Congregational minister Joseph Emerson (cousin of
famed Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson), in 1818
the future promised such an easy marriage of human tech-
nology and divine intent in ensuring agricultural
advancement that the chemist might little think “how
much his labors conduce to bring on that happy state of
things, that shall distinguish the Millennial period” (in
Tuveson 1968: 68).

As Americans turned their territorial gaze across the
Appalachians, they augmented biblical millennialism with
Enlightenment ideas. Nature as the product of a rational
deity justified their interest in the Mississippi River and its
terminus in the Gulf of Mexico, in the peninsula of Florida,
and even in Canada. As Samuel Adams put it in 1778:
“We shall never be upon a solid Footing till Britain
cedes to us what Nature designs we should have, or till
we wrist it from her” (in Weinberg 1958: 22). Nature’s
intent for human beings, which Thomas Jefferson in the
“Declaration of Independence” (1776) had framed as indi-
vidual rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,
could be expanded upon at the national level to include
independence and security from the harmful plotting of other nations, such as France and Spain. For residents of Kentucky this meant “the natural right of the inhabitants of this country to navigate the Mississippi” and to develop the region’s agricultural potential in accordance “with the immense designs of the Deity” (in Weinberg 1958: 25–6), and for Jefferson himself, natural right offered a sufficiently elastic basis for delimiting expansion. When nature intended Americans use of the Mississippi, it must also have intended them a port, he said, since “the right to use a thing, comprehends a right to the means necessary to its use” (in Weinberg 1958: 27). Such elastic rights, to some, suggested the reduction to absurdity of arguments based on natural design. Nevertheless, they enabled Americans to envision themselves within the first few decades of the nineteenth century as a continental power, and – as geographic knowledge replaced myths of the “Great American Desert” – to brush aside the constraints of western mountain ranges and arid lands. Thus the idea that nations were created within natural limits found little to recommend it until Americans had stretched themselves “from sea to shining sea,” as a patriotic hymn put it later in the century.

Publisher John O’Sullivan’s phrase, “manifest destiny,” coined in his mid-1840s Democratic Review editorials favoring annexation of Texas and Oregon, quickly gained great rhetorical power as a wide range of politicians, religious leaders, land speculators and others took it up. Opponents of the notion were themselves divided about America’s course. Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing considered the original Texas revolt of 1836 “an act of criminality” in itself, but also a precedent, he wrote, to Senate leader Henry Clay, since “we cannot seize upon or join to ourselves that territory, without manifesting and strengthening the purpose of setting no limits to our empire” (in Graebner 1968: 48). A decade later, diplomat Albert Gallatin, Ralph Waldo Emerson and a number of Eastern liberals opposed war with Mexico, but most were slow to term manifest destiny simply “political clap-trap,” or to deny its underlying view of Providence, as did the National Intelligencer (in Graebner 1968: 239). Congressional opponents, such as Representative Charles Goodyear, who in 1846 spoke of manifest destiny being a “robber’s title,” were basically intent on averting war with England, and softening U.S. claims to western Canada above the 49th parallel.

Ralph Waldo Emerson himself celebrated the energies expended in continent spanning, seeing “a sublime and friendly Destiny” guiding the human race across America, the future “home of man” (in Graebner 1968: 11). The construction of national railroads, binding people of one region with another, Emerson said, “introduced a multitude of picturesque traits into our pastoral scenery. The tunneling of mountains, the bridging of streams ... the blowing of rocks, explosions all day ...” were signs of national promise and potential, making it possible for the race to tap the vastness of the land, which would be “physic and food for our mind, as well as our body” (in Graebner 1968: 6–7). Even Henry David Thoreau, opposed to so many of his fellow-citizens’ endeavors, felt “Nature’s magnetism” pulling him along the same continental trajectory. “Eastward I go only by force,” he famously acknowledged, “but westward I go free” (Thoreau 1975: 667–8).

The biblical arguments remained effective political justifications throughout the period – and seemed by many expansionists to have been thought sufficient to make England abandon its own interest in Oregon. Former president John Quincy Adams argued in Congress that since England was a Christian nation, it was bound to respect the relevance of Genesis 1:26–28 as the surest foundation of title. Whereas England only wanted Oregon for its Hudson Bay Company trappers, Americans claimed Oregon, Adams concluded, in order to “make the wilderness blossom as the rose, to establish laws, to increase, multiply and subdue the Earth, which we are commanded to do by the first behest of God Almighty” (in Graebner 1968: 109). But even those expansionists who did not draw upon biblical or Transcendentalist mandates spoke of America’s continental destiny with religious, ecstatic, fervor.

William Gilpin, first territorial governor of Colorado, was perhaps foremost – certainly most energetic – among expansion’s intellectual advocates. Gilpin’s writings, dependent upon the theories of the German explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, melded his scientific postulating about the “isothermal zodiac” – the global climactic belt within which empires had developed and moved ever-westward – with enthused descriptions of the American continent and the “pioneer army” he saw pushing across the Rocky Mountains in search of gold and fertile soil. The pioneer, for Gilpin, spearheads the vital portion of the “human current,” which bears with it the immortal fire of civilization revealed to man. This central current has reached the Plateau of America, up which it will ascend to plant the sacred fires over its expanse and shine upon the world with renewed effulgence. Such is the resplendent era and the gorgeous promise unveiled to humanity. The arrival of this is now announced by the indefinite gold production and pastoral power of the interior, domestic region of our continent and country (Gilpin 1974: 53).

Manifest destiny’s advocates could only go so far in making religious or scientific appeals, however. If the English and the Americans might be expected to establish consensual readings of scripture, ponder the isothermal lesson, or merely to submit to diplomatic resolution of the
Oregon dispute – which President Polk achieved in 1846 despite Democrats’ desire to war with England – this possibility was less expected of others who stood in the way of American expansion. In American dealings with Mexico, native tribes, and later with both Cuba and the Philippines, race thus became the key factor in determining the direction of achieving manifest destiny, and violence its often justified means.

As early as the 1820s, when Americans pushed into Cherokee and Choctaw lands, Christian land use seemed a practice that only Anglo-Saxons were capable of employing. Confronted by arguments that Indians were mere occupiers of the soil, and hence lacking any legal title to it, Cherokees and other southern tribes vigorously embraced the agricultural lifestyle and religion of encroaching Americans, and were then sued by the gold-hungry Georgians who wanted their lands – for violating treaty terms. As Governor Troup noted to the Georgia legislature during the debates leading up to passage of the 1830 federal Indian Removal Bill – which eventually solved the problem to the Georgians’ satisfaction – “by changing the mode of life of the aboriginals upon the soil of Georgia,” by causing “her lands to be separately appropriated for the purpose of tillage,” and by promoting “every encouragement to fixed habits of agriculture,” the federal government and the Cherokees “violated the treaties in letter and spirit, and did wrong to Georgia” (in Weinberg 1958: 87). Efforts to “civilize” tribes were thus violations of “the laws of nature,” as one Georgia legislator put it, which “have fixed an insuperable barrier between the moral condition of the savage and the Christian” (in Weinberg 1958: 88).

The belief in Anglo-Saxon moral superiority gained ground as it was deployed not only in the taking of tribal lands, but also in conflicts with Mexico. Some supporters of the 1846 invasion of Mexico and the conquest of California envisioned Mexican citizens greeting American forces as liberators, and perhaps melding into the American population as their lands experienced the regenerative rule of republican institutions and the development of mineral and agricultural resources. The more prominent tendency of republican institutions and the development of mineral and agricultural resources. The more prominent tendency after the war, as Florida’s Senator Westcott complained in 1848, was to reject the idea that the U.S. should receive not merely the white citizens of California and New Mexico, but the peons, negroes, and Indians of all sorts, the wild tribes of Camanches [sic], the bug-and-lizard-eating “Diggers” and other half-monkey savages in those countries as equal citizens of the United States (in Horsman 1981: 276).

By the end of the nineteenth century, carving out national boundaries and dispossessing tribes from their lands ceased to figure in forward-looking American imaginations. The wilderness-transforming energy that white Americans attributed to their Anglo-Saxon roots – and which historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and President Theodore Roosevelt’s Winning of the West (1907) claimed was defining of national character – seemed to have reached a terminus. However, Anglo-Saxon manifest destiny continued to shape American life. The push to open trade with Asia – key to Senator Thomas Hart Benton’s imperial vision as early as the 1820s – and even to acquire Asian colonies, spread widely. By the century’s end the vision was commonly accompanied by a racial justification of U.S. dominance in the Pacific. America’s 1898–1901 war in the Philippines against first Spain, and then insurgent Filipino nationalists, was cast by its supporters in the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations as a repetition of the frontier struggle. For Roosevelt, Filipinos were “Apaches,” playing the same role in thwarting national destiny as Geronimo (in Slotkin 1992: 121). For Senator Albert J. Beveridge, opponents of U.S. military operations in the Philippines – arguing that whites could not successfully live in tropical environments – erred in concluding that the Anglo-Saxon race therefore had no obligations there. On the contrary, he told the Republican National Convention in 1900, “the general welfare of the world” demanded American rule, otherwise this land, rich in all that civilized man requires, and these people needing the very blessings they ignorantly repel, should be remanded to savagery and wilderness. If you say this, you say that barbarism and undeveloped resources are better than civilization and the Earth’s resources developed (in Cherry 1971: 142).

The need to subdue nature, in the course of the twentieth century, lost some of its focus as a theme in American discussions of national aims. Manifest destiny, however, did continue to be invoked, as in the arguments of President Woodrow Wilson for American participation in the First World War, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt for the Second. These weighings of America’s unique responsibility had less to do with the conquest of nature, though, and more with what Wilson framed as the moral mission of American democracy. Nevertheless, America’s mobilization in both wars was also nature’s, since the country’s abundant natural resources provided American factories with the material necessary to achieve victory. Although twentieth-century Americans did at times contest the implications of natural abundance, as in the conservation movement’s debates about “finite” resources during the Gifford Pinchot era and then again in the 1970s, very few seriously advocated an overturning of the economic order that had been built on the basis of manifest destiny. Which is to say that Beveridge’s 1900 challenge to anti-imperialists – that consistency would require them to give “Australia back to its Bushmen, and the United States to its
Indians” – has rarely been accepted, other than by tribal advocates themselves (in Cherry 1971: 148).

But if subduing nature became a given in the twentieth century, popular culture has provided an enduring context in which the task can be reappropriated, its urgency rekindled and its achievements often commemorated. The American landscape is full of memorials to manifest destiny, none more striking than Colorado’s Mount of the Holy Cross, which journalist Samuel Bowles was first to proclaim as a divine seal of approval upon American enterprise in The Switzerland of America: A Summer Vacation in the Parks and Mountains of Colorado (1869), and which Yellowstone explorer and artist William Henry Jackson first photographed in 1873. Made a national monument in 1929, the mountain’s deep snow-filled couloirs offered several generations of pilgrims confirmation that nature itself spoke the gospel in America. Although its remoteness kept visitation at such low levels that the federal government removed it from the list of national monuments in 1955, and the permanent snowfields have subsequently melted in part, reproductions of the Jackson photograph and numerous paintings of the mountain circulated widely for long afterwards, and Climbers for Christ offered cyberspace images of the mountain at their website.

The remembered past, embodied in works of art and architecture, or in numerous historical and recreational sites, also preserves the vision of manifest destiny. Emmanuel Leutze’s gigantic mural “Across the Continent, Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” (1864) hangs in the U.S. Capitol. Mass circulation prints of Fanny Palmer’s “Emigrants Crossing the Plains” (1868), or John Gast’s “Westward Ho” (1872) linked technology, American determination and divine inspiration – in Gast’s case by means of a gigantic, gauzy-gowned Goddess of Liberty floating above westward-moving citizens, telegraph wire and law book in her hands. The homes of westward-pushing or western-raised heroes such as Daniel Boone and Abraham Lincoln, battle sites such as Wounded Knee, the Little Bighorn, and the Alamo; monuments such as the Jefferson Arch and Mount Rushmore; and consumer theme parks such as Disneyland; are all centers at which tourists absorb the spirit of manifest destiny. Innumerable annual “Pioneer Day” celebrations – such as the “Laura Ingalls Wilder Days” in DeSmet, South Dakota – offer small-town and big-city residents the chance to connect with official American power. His most conventional religious gesture is his performance of the mummified body of a Navajo holy man, which he displays in his office for the Navajo tribe. In one scene, when American defeat before the Japanese invasion

sent as the just and overarching aim of the American people, while Wayne serves as its closed-mouth and hard-fighting but morally virtuous agent. The Wayne persona is most at home on horseback, passing confidently across the land, or nestled rifle-at-the-ready, against rock, tree or sand – though as Gary Wills (1997) points out, he also fills the frame of the interior shots in Stagecoach (1939) with the ease of a man of nature. He has enough experience with indigenous people to be on speaking terms with them, and to know their habits and aims, but generally avoids familiarity, and even when preventing imperial violence – as in Rio Grande (1950) – he upholds the aim of civilizing the savage and making the land into a secure home for Americans. As a heroic figure he rarely approves of run-of-the-mill religious expression, telling the whore in Sands of Iwo Jima (1949) – with whom he drinks but doesn’t sleep – “Don’t get religion on me” when she offers to pray for him, and ridiculing the preaching of Ward Bond in The Searchers (1958). Nevertheless, he embodies the muscular Christianity advocated by Theodore Roosevelt for urban Americans growing soft in the aftermath of frontier conquest. He casually refers to God as “Sir” in Rio Grande, and “the man upstairs” in Sands of Iwo Jima. At the center of his character is duty, and rarely does it lead him into conflict with official American power. His most conventional religious gesture is his performance of perfunctory but heartfelt funeral services, in which he returns to the Earth either unfortunate subordinates or enemies fallen in his conflicts over soil.

Though Wayne worked with several directors, and played a variety of heroic roles, these portraits cohere in ways that consistently underscore the centrality of manifest destiny to his persona and to an understanding of America as an ideal. Consider, for example, the thematic overlap between Red River (1948) for Howard Hawks, his Rio Grande trilogy for John Ford (1948–50), his self-produced The Alamo (1960), and such war films as Flying Tigers (1942), The Fighting Seabees (1944), They Were Expendable (1945), and The Sands of Iwo Jima. The westerns emphasize the righteousness of Wayne’s violence against Indians and Mexicans; the Pacific-based war films present racially uncomplicated portraits of the American fight against Japanese aggressors. But Wayne and his directors erase the historical gap between western conquest and Pacific war by a spatial assimilation; Texas, Arizona, a Pacific island, these separate pieces of Earth are the same under the sweep of Wayne’s gun. Overwhelmingly, Wayne’s violence – even that which is clearly brutal – fulfills a fundamentally religious function, providing what Richard Slotkin (1992) calls “regeneration.” In They Were Expendable – the story of U.S. Navy patrol torpedo boats in the opening days of World War II – the western and war story mix to provide a historical, or mythical, gloss on American possession of the Philippines. In one
appears certain, Wayne’s Lt. Rusty Ryan talks with Dad Knowland, an old boat-builder who refuses to flee. He sits on the front step of his tropical homestead, rifle and whiskey bottle in hand, and tells Ryan: “I worked forty years for this, son. If I leave it they’ll have to carry me out,” while the background music provides a chorus of “Red River Valley” – a folk-song from the end of the nineteenth century that helped romanticize the American annexation of Texas lands south of the Red River. Music also underscores the righteousness of the American cause in the final scene, as the Civil War’s “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” helps reconcile viewers to a shot of Wayne’s boatless crew marching ragtag off to sacrifice themselves in the jungle. The familiar hymn enables viewer consent to the extension of America’s redemptive role in the Pacific, as the land appropriated by one generation of manifest destiny advocates, and defended by another, is made meaningful through connection with the most important example of regenerative violence in American history – the chastened killing and massive dying that Lincoln declared “hallowed” at Gettysburg.

Howard Hawks’ *Red River* connects the Western adventure with the biblical account of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, a point which Hawks’ screenwriter, novelist William Faulkner, emphasized obliquely to a journalist in 1955 during the filming of *Land of the Pharaohs*. According to Faulkner “It’s ‘Red River’ all over again. The Pharaoh is the cattle baron, his jewels are the cattle, and the Nile is the Red River” (in Hillier and Wollen 1996: 2). In “Red River,” Wayne, playing the historic cattleman Tom Dunson, blazer of the Chisholm Trail, establishes his claim to land below the river by shooting without clear provocation or much explanation a Mexican *vaquero*, who challenges Dunson’s presence on land his boss had received as a grant from the King of Spain. Justification comes from sidekick Walter Brennan (Groot), who remarks “That’s too much land for one man. Why it ain’t decent. Here’s all this land aching to be used and never has been. I tell you, it ain’t decent.” The perfunctory killing, the *vaquero*’s brief burial, over which Dunson presides, and the branding of their small stock of cattle are sufficient to mark the land as home for the forward-looking Dunson, who plans to raise the largest herd in Texas and satisfy the American family needs for an abundance of beef.

In both films, American land, wherever it is, is home to American enterprise, violence establishes or maintains its original – and contextless – Anglo-Saxon appropriation, and American identity is framed as relentless, forward-looking and violence-bestowing determination to hold this land in the face of threats from non-Anglos. These twin themes of appropriation and defense of the land overshadow almost any other in Wayne’s films, to the extent that his muscular Christian hero rarely appears as a mere worker of the land. And in an age where manifest destiny is already an accomplished fact, his hero is out of step, harkening back to the time when nature’s abundance was not yet assured, or still threatened by the nation’s demonic foes.

Wayne’s normative nostalgia often served to revive American ideals in challenging times, especially in films produced in the midst of the Second World War, or under the cloud of Cold War uncertainty, as were so many of his westerns. Their frequent reliance upon manifest destiny to establish the meaning of America’s mission in the past and its role in the present ran up against the wall of defeat in Vietnam, however, a war which Wayne sought to reinvigorate in familiar terms with *The Green Berets* (1968). But the nature presented by southeast Asian jungles offered little that Wayne could depict as home for American enterprise. Sacrifice for soil comes through more successfully, however, as the Special Forces unit Wayne commands fights off a massive Vietcong siege of their central highlands compound, reversing the outcome of Mexican General Santa Ana’s famous 1836 siege of the Alamo. Soil, sacrifice and the example of history mattered as well to President Lyndon Johnson, a Texan whose grandfather may have died at the Alamo, and to whom Wayne wrote in 1965 in support of Johnson’s deployment of U.S. troops. For Wayne, the causes were the same, enabling him to use the justification his “Alamo” character, Davy Crockett, offered. “We don’t want people like Kosygin, Mao Tse-tung, or the like” Wayne told Johnson, “‘gorin’ our oxes’” (in Wills 1997: 228).

In the decades since, American popular culture has apparently abandoned Wayne’s faith in manifest destiny and America’s overcoming of geography through violence, though he remains Hollywood’s most popular figure. Certainly the western saga, as a story of righteous conquest or personal and social redemption achieved through Anglo-Saxon subduing the land, has ceased to animate culture producers. Likewise, Anglo-Saxon racialism has lost its resonance as a public justification for resource extraction. Since Vietnam, Hollywood cameras have often captured war itself through a cynical lens. But the taming of the American landscape – the domestication of nature – that western expansionists first envisioned as the divinely commissioned destiny of the American people is reaffirmed through their endless journeying – moving, working, vacationing – over the country’s vast transportation network, and their absorption of natural resources into the needs and designs of their daily lives. Bound by duty to wield a gun in defense of American enterprise, Wayne’s characters rarely had time to share in the absorption of nature which this enterprise enables.

Perhaps this absorption has been secularized. However the forthright James Watt, Secretary of the Interior under President Ronald Reagan from 1981 to 1983, certainly viewed America’s consumption of nature within a decidedly traditional religious framework. In telling Congress that “my responsibility is to follow the Scriptures,
which call upon us to occupy the land until Jesus returns,” he brought back into public life the millennial assumptions regarding the American land and the American mission that had so shaped the idea of manifest destiny to begin with (Klein 1981: 22). By the century’s end that orientation had not lessened among the general public, though it was anathema to left-leaning journalists and environmental activists. In addition, the equation of moral purpose and political power that has guided America’s role on the twentieth-century international frontier was still leading early twenty-first century American policymakers to sound biblical echoes, as it led Albert J. Beveridge in 1900, to wonder “When nations shall war no more without the consent of the American Republic: what American heart thrills not with pride at that prospect?” (in Cherry 1971: 153).

Matthew Glass

Further Reading
See also: Book of Nature; Disney Worlds at War; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Holy Land in Native North America; Indigenous Environmental Network; Native American Languages; Nature Religion in the United States; Thoreau, Henry David.

A Manifesto to North American Middle-Class Christians

Preamble
It is time for an Ecological Reformation. The Protestant Reformation and Vatican II brought the importance of the human individual to the attention of Christians. It was a powerful revolution with many impressive religious and political results. But our current version of this model – the individualistic market model, in which each of us has the right to all we can get – is devastating the planet and making other people poor. This model is bankrupt and dangerous. We now need a new model of who we are in the scheme of things and therefore how we should act in the world.

The Individualistic Model
The model of human being as individual is deeply engrained in North American culture. Its goal is oriented to individuals – to their rights and desires. North American Christianity has also been focused on individual well-being, either as salvation of believers or comfort to the distressed. This model of human life supports that we are a collection of individuals who have the right to improve our own lives in whatever ways we can. We see ourselves as separate from other people, while acknowledging the right of others to improve themselves. But this is not a description of “the way things are”; it is a model, a way of seeing ourselves and nature. It is a way that is proving to be harmful to most of the world’s people and to nature.

There is very little public discussion of the key consequences of this model: climate change (global warming), the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the extinction of other species, and the rapid decline in natural resources. We are being kept in denial about the seriousness of these major global issues by powerful business lobbies and timid politicians, but also by our own reluctance to disrupt the most comfortable lifestyle that any people on Earth have ever enjoyed.

The Ecological Model
The individualistic market model has failed us: it has limited religious viability and it is proving to be dangerous to our planet. We need another model of human life: we need an Ecological Reformation. An Ecological Reformation would base its model of human life on how reality is understood in our time. The picture of reality emerging from cosmology, evolutionary biology, and ecology today focuses on relations and community, not on individuals and objects. We are all related: we all came from the same beginning.
This story also provides us with a new model of human life. In this story, human beings are not individuals with the power to use nature in whatever ways they wish. Rather, we are dependent on nature and responsible for it. In a sharp reversal, we do not control nature, but rely utterly on it. The rest of nature does not, however, depend on us; in fact, if human beings were to disappear from the Earth tomorrow, all plants and animals would be better off.

Our radical dependence on nature means that we are also responsible for it. As the species currently laying waste the planet – and aware that we are doing so – we must accept responsibility for our actions. The ecological model of human life tells us not only who we are but also what we must do: it gives us guidelines on how we should act. In other words, it is a functional creation story, one that has practical implications for how we live at personal and public levels.

We could call these implications our new “house rules.” The common creation story tells us that the Earth is our home – it is where we evolved and where we belong. It also tells us what we must do for all of us to live decently and happily here. House rules are what one pins on the refrigerator as guidelines for sharing the space, the food, the resources of the home. The basic rules are: take only your share, clean up after yourself, and keep the house in good repair for future occupants. The ecological model comes with some definite house rules, clearly seen in the fact that “ecology” and “economics” come from the same word root having to do with laws for living in a household. The basic rule is that if everyone is to have a place at the table, the limits of planetary energy must be acknowledged. The house rules of our home set limits to growth – both of our consumer desires and the size of the human population. We need, then, to become “ecologically literate,” to learn what we can and cannot do if our home is to continue to exist in a sustainable way. We must fit our little economy into the Big Economy, Earth’s economy, if our economy is to survive.

Christianity and the Ecological Model
As Christians we need to do all this and more. This new model, which could be summarized by a version of Irenaeus’ watchword – the glory of God is every creature fully alive – provides Christians with new ways to say that God is with us on the Earth and that God is for us, especially the oppressed. This new model suggests to Christians that the way to picture God’s presence with us is the eschatological banquet to which all are invited, all people and all other creatures.

The ecological model, then, suggests a new vision of the “abundant,” the good life. We must envision models of the abundant life based not on material goods, but on those things that really make people happy: the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter; medical care and educational opportunities; loving relationships; meaningful work; an enriching imaginative and spiritual life; and time spent with friends and in the natural world. In order to move toward this good life, we will need to make changes at every level: personal, professional, and public – how we live in our houses, how we conduct our work lives, and how we structure economic and political institutions. It is a life that for us North Americans may well involve limitation and significant change in our level of comfort. Christians might see it as form of discipleship, a cruciform life of sacrifice and sharing burdens.

A Call to Action
The Ecological Reformation is the great work before us. The urgency of this task is difficult to overstate. We do not have centuries to turn ourselves around and begin to treat our planet and our poorer brothers and sisters differently. We may not even have the next century. But the scales are falling from our eyes and we see what we must do. We must change how we think about ourselves and we must act on that new knowledge. We must see ourselves as both radically dependent on nature and as supremely responsible for it. And most of all, we North American privileged people who are consuming many times our share at the table must find ways to restructure our society, our nation, and the world toward great equitability. Christians should be at the forefront of this great work – and it is a great work. Never before have people had to think about the well-being of the entire planet – we did not ask for this task, but it is the one being demanded of us. We Christians must participate in the agenda the planet has set before us – in public and prophetic ways – as our God “who so loved the world” would have us do.

Sallie McFague

See also: Christianity (7d) – Feminist Theology; McFague, Sallie.

Manser, Bruno (1954–2000) and the Penan of Sarawak
Born into a devout Protestant family in Basel, Switzerland, Bruno Manser was one of the foremost global campaigners for the indigenous Penan nomads of Sarawak, Malaysia, until his suspicious disappearance in Sarawak, on or around 25 May 2000. With a worldview centered on communal harmony and the veneration of nature, Manser was a firm believer and active practitioner of nonviolent civil disobedience. Gaining wide fame and attention in Europe, Manser and the nonprofit, Swiss-based Bruno Manser Fonds (in English, the Bruno Manser Foundation) campaigned fiercely and relentlessly for two decades to stop the decimation of tropical forests, to defend and
institutionalize the rights of indigenous peoples to autonomy and self-determination, and to document egregious violations of basic human rights.

Manser was primarily focused on saving the indigenous Penan and their communal forests on the island of Borneo, and in this pursuit he was a formidable self-taught ethnographer, ethnobotanist, artist, writer, linguist, craftsman and photographer. His informal medical studies ensured his self-treatment and recovery from a lethal bite of a red-tailed pit viper while living in remote Penan territories in 1989.

One of three boys and two girls born to a factory worker, Manser’s parents wanted him to become a doctor. Surrounded and nourished by the tempered wilderness of the Swiss Alps, Manser early on challenged the epistemological dictates of "civilization." An independent thinker from the start, at nineteen years old Manser spent three months in a Lucerne prison for conscientious objection to Switzerland’s compulsory military service. While he was known to be aware of the Gandhian philosophy of Satyagraha, the extent of Manser’s familiarity with the non-violent ideologies of Tolstoy, Thoreau or Martin Luther King is less certain.

Leaving prison in 1973, Manser lived for twelve years as a cowherd in a secluded Swiss alp, where he laid bricks, carved leather and kept bees. He wove, dyed and cut his own clothes and shoes. Mountaineering and technical climbing were regular pursuits. Foreshadowing later solo wilderness expeditions in Malaysia, Mexico, Congo (Zaire) and Alaska, Manser ventured alone into the Swiss mountains for long periods.

In 1984 Manser traveled with an English spelunking expedition to explore the Gunung Mulu National Park in Borneo. Afterward he traveled deep into the interior of Sarawak to find and live with the Penan. “In my search to understand the deep essence of our humanity,” Manser said, “there grew in me the desire to learn from a people who still live close to their source. At Swiss libraries I found almost nothing about the Penan of Sarawak, and so I said ‘I want to go there’” (personal communication, 1993).

From 1984 to 1989 Manser lived intimately with the Penan, mastering the Penan language, documenting the ethnology of the Penan and their natural environment. Manser adopted the Penan way of life absolutely, dressing in a loincloth, hunting with a blowpipe and bow and arrows, eating primates and snakes and the staple sago palm of the Penan diet. Manser’s respect and sensitivity for the Penan gained him an unprecedented status in the egalitarian and non-hierarchical community of the last several hundred nomadic Penan.

Bruno Manser’s total immersion in the Penan lifestyle became a source of much derision, humor and ridicule in the West, and his experience was often dismissed as “pure Hollywood” foolishness. “They called me ‘white Tarzan,’ ‘medical school drop-out,’ ‘short-time hero’; they even said I had taken two Penan wives,” said Manser (personal communication, 1993).

To those who investigated or knew his story, Bruno Manser was venerated. He was known and respected by Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Christian leaders, whom he often met with, at home and abroad. Manser’s nonviolent protests (especially prolonged public fasts) drew the attention of Switzerland’s churches: Catholic and Protestant leaders in Switzerland regularly dedicated services to Manser. An exemplary citizen, respected for his efforts to mitigate Penan suffering, Manser grew in stature, often portrayed as a moral beacon for religious stories, themes and dedications; for church services and celebrations (especially Confirmation); and for protracted rites where Bruno Manser was chosen as the focus of prolonged meditations. After his disappearance, the veneration of Bruno Manser increased significantly: school and church groups frequently requested information from the BMF.

Absent any judicial recourse to the unrestricted logging that was increasingly devastating the remaining indigenous forests of Borneo, the Penan in the early-1980s instituted nonviolent blockades of logging operations, blockades that continued over subsequent decades. While their plight was mostly ignored and marginalized, the Penan persisted in attempting to further their indigenous rights to autonomy and self-determination through international forums, local actions and the efforts of Penan leaders both resident and exiled.

Bruno Manser’s role in Penan blockades is uncertain. Living amongst the Penan from 1984 to 1990, a fugitive remaining in Malaysia without a visa, Manser catapulted the Penan story onto the world stage. He did not participate in logging blockades but the Malaysian and Sarawakian government nonetheless blamed him for Penan actions. In 1990 he left the Penan to campaign in Europe, Japan and North America to stop the logging of Penan territories. Manser correctly perceived that the economic policies of the already industrialized nations would determine the future of indigenous people like the Penan.

In December 1992 Manser led a twenty-day hunger strike in front of Marubeni Corporation headquarters in downtown Tokyo, Japan. In 1993 he led a sixty-day fast, supported by forty hunger-strikers, in front of the Swiss Parliament. In 1996, Manser and Jacques Christiné hung huge banners on the auxiliary cable of the Swiss Kleinmatterhorn aerial cable car, a risky action for which Manser was criticized by some supporters. There were countless lesser actions, meetings with parliaments and corporate executives, and appearances at international conferences and before the United Nations. By 2000, Bruno Manser Fonds raised over $10,000 to establish a mobile dental clinic for the Penan but the Malaysian government refused to cooperate and rejected the project.
In 2000, Manser privately confirmed that success in Sarawak had been “less than zero” (personal communication). He was deeply saddened. Academics, newspapers and officials widely criticized and derided Manser, although the U.S. press ignored the Bruno Manser and Penan story altogether. Malaysian officials were hardened by Manser’s presence in Sarawak. Some environmental groups blamed Manser for inflaming the Malaysian government. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed blamed Manser for disrupting law and order. In a personal letter to Manser, Mahathir wrote:

As a Swiss living in the laps of luxury with the world’s highest standard of living, it is the height of arrogance for you to advocate that the Penans live on maggots and monkeys in their miserable huts, subjected to all kinds of diseases (Mahathir, 3 March 1992).

Mahathir responded to Penan blockades with the designation of Biosphere Reserves for the Penan (subsequently logged illegally). Dr. Mahathir in 1987 invoked Malaysia’s State Security Act to jail critics of the regime. The Act was also used to neutralize the Penan campaign: at the time of writing, over 1200 people had been arrested for challenging the logging; up to 1500 Malaysian soldiers and police had stormed barricades, beaten and arrested people; bulldozers had leveled nomadic camps; and the Sarawak government tolerated criminal gangs hired by logging firms to intimidate the indigenous people.

The government of Sarawak’s Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud responded with military operations targeting Manser. Through his embarrassing investigations and reports, Manser gained the wrath of many timber companies. He evaded Malaysian security on numerous occasions to visit the Penan. Soldiers in Malaysia hunted him, and he was captured by soldiers, and escaped under gunfire, twice. Declared “enemy of the state number one,” a $50,000 word-of-mouth bounty was rumored and widely believed to have been placed on Manser’s head: the source of the bounty remains unconfirmed.

Manser’s expedition to document the effects of logging and war on the Ituri pygmies in the rainforest of Congo (Zaire) in 1995 occurred amid widespread political upheaval and terror. Manser returned to Switzerland with a massive body of moving ethnographic photographs, later shown at expositions around Europe. His efforts to defend the Penan never ceased.

In 1999 Manser entered Sarawak illegally, and was arrested and deported after landing a motorized glider on the property of Sarawak’s Chief Minister Taib Mahmud, where a group of Penan leaders, never welcome, were waiting to get a meeting with the Chief Minister. On 22 May 2000, on what became his last mission to Sarawak to meet with Penan friends besieged by logging, Bruno Manser disappeared without a trace on or after 25 May 2000. He was last seen by a Penan friend within two days’ walk from the village of Bario, Sarawak, not far from the base of Batu Lawi, the venerated limestone spire. Within a year, the pristine forest where Manser disappeared was logged.

Throughout his life Manser quietly rejected the dogmatism of religion, especially his native Christianity. In contradistinction, Manser found his personal beliefs confirmed in alignment with aspects of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and animism that he considered noble and sacred. Manser’s spiritual coherence with nature was born in his youthful and mostly solitary explorations of the alpine environment; his coherence with animism was keenly furthered through his deep association with the Penan. Manser believed in following one’s dreams, no matter the impediments or implications. With a very poignant understanding of the commonality of hopes and fears of human beings, Manser lived life in respect of all beings, and in respect of the unseen world, which he considered the base of all life.

In the Penan cosmology, Manser was known as lakei Penan – Penan man – signifying the respect the Penan held for their adopted brother. Manser’s drawings and stories collected during his stay with the Penan are richly elaborated with tales of animal and nature spirits, and the concomitant superstitions and taboos. Manser documented oral histories from Penan elders and recorded and translated their interpretations of self, tribe and nature.

Manser’s documentation of the Penan way was intimate and unprecedented. Sense of place is paramount in the Penan cosmology, where the geomorphology is intimately known and all natural objects (trees, rivers, animals, etc.) have creation stories or fables associated with them. Penan social and gender roles attest to a deeply spiritual and respectful cosmology absent of hierarchy. Manser’s intimacy with, and acceptance by, the Penan enabled him to transcend the arrogance and ethnocentricity that characterize and inform (detrimentally) much anthropological research. He was painstaking in his efforts accurately to interpret the metaphysical and practical symbology of the Penan. Manser claimed that in his six years with the Penan he never witnessed an argument or expression of violence of any kind. He often spoke of the peace and violence of the forest, and the joys and sorrows of the Penan way.

In January 2002, hundreds of Penan gathered for a private commemoration of Manser with the ritual tawai ceremony (“think fondly of someone or something that is not here”). With taboos against speaking the names of the dead, the Penan will forever address Manser as lakei tawang (“man who has become lost”) and lakei e’h metat (“man who has disappeared”).

Keith Harmon Snow
Marshall, Robert (1901–1939)

Robert Marshall was an Alaskan explorer, a relentless advocate for preserving samples of American wilderness, and the primary founder of the Wilderness Society. Marshall had a lifelong fascination with the exploration of unmapped wilderness and the enjoyment of the wilderness experience. This resulted in his exploration and initial mapping of the Central Brooks Range of Northern Alaska. As early as his undergraduate college days at the School of Forestry at Syracuse University, Marshall expressed sadness at the loss of wild conditions throughout North America. By the time he earned his doctoral degree in plant physiology, in 1930, he believed that if something were not done soon, no significant samples of American wilderness would remain. Thus, in 1935, with several others (most notably, Aldo Leopold and Benton MacKaye, the “father of the Appalachian Trail”), he founded the Wilderness Society, whose mission was to save as much American wilderness as possible. Marshall also financed nearly all of the Wilderness Society’s activities from 1935 to 1939.

Most of Marshall’s wilderness preservation arguments were designed to appeal to utilitarian values. He often referred to wilderness as a “resource,” and argued that a “balanced” approach to resource planning would have to include large amounts of undeveloped landscape. Perhaps this is not surprising because Marshall was trained as a forester and scientist, and had mainly to convince foresters and scientists. Like any effective communicator, he spoke in the language of his audience. As a result, his best arguments advocate wilderness for providing a unique human experience rather than for its value independent of humans.

On the other hand, there are important streaks of pantheism in Marshall, perhaps not well recognized even by himself. Most importantly, he viewed wild places as sacred. He was brought up in the Jewish faith, and once, at age 24, he took a long reflective walk in the mountains of Idaho for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On this hike, he spent three hours sitting on a rock in quiet contemplation. The setting, he reported, was conducive to the purpose, for “there was no wandering of thoughts to the chance of the Pirates in the World Series ... nor even to the less frivolous subjects of pine production or the political situation.” He thus found himself forced to confess that in Temple ... it has in the past been impossible to banish [trivial] thoughts from my mind, and, at best, fasting, hard seats and dull sermons are not conducive to deep thought. Therefore, I feel that my celebration of Yom Kippur, though unorthodox, was very profitable (Glover 1986: 81).

Wild nature, in other words, was Marshall’s temple, his sacred space. And the spiritual value of wilderness to him explains much about his enormous drive to preserve it. In one of his most telling statements, he observed that, for people like himself, the wilderness experience “is absolutely essential to happiness. In the wilderness they enjoy the most worthwhile and perhaps the only worthwhile part of life” (Glover 1986: 96).

Thus Marshall’s religion, if he had one, was nature. A short statement he made to a friend after the death of his father, Louis Marshall, tells as much about his religious philosophy as he ever revealed:

Fortunately, I suppose due to the general philosophy I have about life and death I didn’t take [my father’s] passing as emotionally as you imagine. The significance read into death is of course an individual matter. Between the most glorious conceptions of heaven and the unbearable ideas about hell there is infinite room for divergence. Personally, I do not believe in any hereafter and my guess is that death means oblivion. Yet it is a perfectly inevitable event, and nothing which is inevitable seems tragic (Glover 1986: 110).

Death, in other words, though sad, was perfectly natural to Marshall, who spent enough time in wild nature to recognize the role of death in the natural, “inevitable” unfolding of events, and to realize, surely, that without death there is no life. All of which would be unremarkable had Marshall not lived in a culture obsessed with removing itself from nature by, among other things, denying death.

Still, Marshall’s spirituality remains obscure, hidden behind his rejection of the Judeo-Christian conception of God, his non-belief in an afterlife, his activism in secular issues like politics and civil liberties, his human-centered arguments for wilderness as a “resource,” and the percep-
tion that he was always in a hurry to get things done (as if he knew he had less than 39 years to live).

Perhaps, had he lived longer, he might better have articulated for himself and others the intuitive feeling of sacredness that drove him hard to defend wild places — even if his culture demanded he do so mostly in the language of human-centered, scientific rationalism.

James M. Glover

Further Reading
See also: Leopold, Aldo; Muir, John; Pinchot, Gifford; Wilderness Religion; Wilderness Society.

Martial Arts

Caution: “Those who know do not talk, and talkers do not know”
Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching 56 (R.B. Blakney, tr.).

The quasi-mythical origins of many Asian martial arts enfold them within a religious context and tradition. This is clear whether they are traced to Bodhidharma in the sixth century — who, legend has it, traveled from India to teach Buddhism in China and found the monks in such pathetic physical condition that he invented exercises to improve their health and self-defense capabilities — or linked to Cheng San-Feng, a thirteenth-century monk who introduced taijiquan as a “grand ultimate” method of internal martial art among Shaolin monks. From the beginning, the fundamental practices found in these martial arts bear a strong family resemblance in terms of ritual, discipline, and psychophysical effects to the fundamental practices of nearly every world religion.

Many Asian martial arts are explicit regarding their spiritual goals (enlightenment, embodying eternal principles in the apparent finitude of physical life) and methods (meditative standing and ritualized movement designed to produce spiritual insight). This is especially true of the so-called “internal” styles from China (like taijiquan, baguazhang, and xing yil or Japan (like aikido and those which emphasize the perfection of character over fighting skills). In “harder” or “external” styles, which include Chinese “kung fu” forms probably best known to the West through popular stereotypes from martial art movies with names like Preying Mantis, Tiger, Dragon, and White Crane, the spiritual dimension is more implicit. The complex family trees of Okinawan karate and many of the Korean styles are included in this category. These styles stress fighting skills — but even those emphasizing the most brutal physicality eventually turn inward to consider, as integral to mastery, the psychospiritual aspects of their training. Whether internal or external, these martial arts achieve their physical aim (self-defense) and their spiritual aim (insight into the ground of existence) in the same way; by exhorting practitioners to move, and to exist, naturally.

Nearly all ritual practices in the Asian martial arts are informed by symbolic heuristics derived from nature. Typically, one begins by learning the series of movements characteristic of the particular martial art — just as in a monastery one begins to learn the correct postures for meditation, to bow in a specific way, to perform cycles of movement in yoga postures, or walk mindfully. The movements themselves often carry the names of animals or natural phenomena and these provide a kind of symbolic representation for the physical postures the practitioner attempts to emulate. In Tiger style the hands often imitate a tiger’s claws. The stance and finger placement in Preying Mantis resemble a preying mantis as she stalks and then grasps her prey. Movements in taijiquan like Dragon Spits Out Pearl or Stork Cools Wings seem to adopt something of the animal to which they refer. “Long boxing” exhorts its practitioners to imagine striking with the pent-up force, the inertial density, of a great river (the name refers to the “long” distance the energy travels from ground, to leg, waist, shoulder, arm, hand, and finally into the opponent — as if with the “long” weight of a great river). But while the outward forms may bear some relation to animals, the identification is made for psychological ends.

Consider Wave Hands As Clouds — a movement common to most forms of taijiquan (in some topological configuration it is common to every martial art). There may be some sense in which the hands look like clouds waving back and forth but the name is more of an instruction to the mind than to the body. It is a kind of iconic template that brings body and mind together. Identification with the icon allows the practitioner to absorb the deeper significance for which the icon is a conduit or veil. Cloud Hands tells you to move fluidly and in rounded motions. This psychological suggestion — “wave my hands like clouds” — is exactly how the martial arts appropriate nature in order to cultivate, first, sound biomechanical techniques, second, effortless technique in movement, and then, as if by infection, effortless effort in every corner of life.

Animals and natural phenomena inform the physical and psychospiritual practices in most Asian martial arts

Martial Arts 1049

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but the religious end of identification with these structures lies in cultivating the internal energy called *qi* (or, under the old Wade-Giles system of transliteration, *ch‘i*). The concept of *qi* requires an encyclopedia of its own but, just as many kinds of yoga attempt to cultivate and then use prana for spiritual attainment, the aim of most Asian martial arts is to cultivate and then apply *qi*. Cultivating one’s *qi* is the first step toward a spiritual understanding of one’s relation to one’s self and to the rest of the universe. In the language of meditative technique, identifying with the heuristics derived from nature makes it possible to cultivate *qi* because of the focus and concentration this identification creates.

Identification with these metaphors and beginning the process of developing one’s *qi* is a first step toward proper form. In martial arts practice, in sparring or grappling for instance, proper form means greatest biomechanical efficiency. Biomechanical efficiency makes it possible to relax or loosen the muscles, and the mind that moves them, and allow *qi* to flow. Once the *qi* is accumulated and put to work informing one’s movements the practitioner finds him or herself stronger and faster than any opponent. Using internal energy is said to be infinitely greater than mere physical strength. Oddly, cultivating and using *qi* is said to be possible only when the practitioner is completely relaxed or loose. *Qi* cannot “flow properly” when the practitioner is tensed or exerting him/herself physically.

Here we run into the kind of paradox that seems ever present in Asian thinking – the internal energy that makes you strong only works when you loosen your muscles completely or, to put this in even more obscure language: one can only be strong through yielding, one can only advance by retreating, etc. It is, in other words, nearly impossible to express the physiological effects of this looseness using mere language – as Lao Tzu wisely noted in our opening quote – but it is quite easy, and often dramatic, to experience the effects in practice. The tension between the rational and experiential modes of understanding of these ideas suggests something about the futility and even the danger of attempting to describe, in language, experiences that seem to transcend language. Experiencing can be hard enough; understanding is harder still; but describing these effects in words turns out to be nearly impossible.

A humorous aside: a lot has been written about *qi*, not all of it useful. There is a “*ch‘i/qi-whiz*” factor associated with this aspect of martial arts practice. In the same way that novices practicing meditation sometimes mistake their early experiences for Enlightenment, it is not surprising to hear novice martial artists discuss their sudden and astonishing facility with the mysterious powers of *qi*; in both cases this is almost always the sign of an overly-enthusiastic beginner. The martial arts thus carry the same hazards as any other spiritual practice. Pride, envy, attachment, overestimation of advancement, and all the other Sirens call to the ego from every side. Short of tying yourself to the mast of your ship, like Odysseus, humor is the next-best prophylaxis. The most direct and pithy comment this author has ever heard on the matter was at a seminar in Green Bay, Wisconsin, some years ago when I had the good fortune to meet Nate Defensor, an instructor in Philippine martial arts. I asked Nate why I had not heard any mention of *qi* development in Filipino martial arts. Nate grinned and said, “Oh, we were too poor to have *qi*. We had rice instead.”

Describing *qi* is fraught with dangers but the experiential effects of proper form are relatively easy to describe. Performing the movements incorrectly (when sparring or grappling) is difficult and requires a great deal of physical exertion. Performing the movements properly by using internal energy or *qi* instead of one’s mere physical strength – having properly assimilated the ideas of naturalness, in other words – is startlingly easy: it is, in fact, effortless. Martial artists call this “good technique” and it begins to explain why smaller, much older, men and women can defeat one or more younger and apparently stronger opponents. Efficient technique, properly applied, can offset uninformd, merely physical strength.

We could describe this seeming effortlessness as the result of habituating and employing proper biomechanics along with the complementary psychological conditioning, but it seems to be more than this. It is, in fact, the physical correlate of the naturalness and ease that lies at the heart of Daoism and the meditative practices of Hinduism and Buddhism. The effortlessness of good physical technique requires a thorough understanding of the truth of your position, balance, and relation to the world around you. The psychological aspect of this is to see beyond the apparent distinction between yourself and your opponent, or yourself and the world, to an underlying unity that grounds both. The spiritual aspect, when physical and psychological come together, is effortless effort, or *wu wei*. Effortless technique is thus a physical manifestation of properly assimilating and understanding *wu wei*. Here the circle of training the body turns out to be the circle that trains the spirit.

Every mystical practice depends on quieting the ego-consciousness, whether by spinning the prayer wheel of a mantra, through the fire of aspiring passions, or completing a complex series of physical movements. Once the drunken-monkey brain of everyday consciousness is quieted (either by being occupied with its exercises or through an identification with the animal or natural form), the practitioner can begin to perceive reality and their place in it as *it is* – as a whole rather than as the broken and fleeting sensations of daily consciousness. To borrow the traditional metaphor, we can imagine that the universe is a great lake and the mind a wind blowing across it. If we could stop this wind from fracturing the
surface into a cracked glaze of wavelets, then the lake would become smooth and allow the soul to see its true reflection. Martial arts calms these waters like any other yogic or spiritual practice. Quieting the mind is required for **wu wei** and for the effortlessness that characterizes excellent technique.

Considered in a religious context we might argue that martial arts is a branch of raja yoga; the yoga of psycho-physical experimentation. The physical exercises harness their practitioners to a spiritual grindstone. The circle of training they tread produces religious effects. The practices themselves are a yoke of physical and psychological ritual – in all Asian martial arts this means learning a series of complex movements which, in principle, contain the combat applications specific to different styles. These movement sets are learned and internalized to the point that they become habitual. Like a prayer wheel or mantra, these physical movements become an axle of focus, concentration, and meditation. Achieving facility with these movements requires concentration, attention to increasingly minute details, a concomitant increase in alert mindfulness, and the cultivation of effortlessness. This mindfulness maps directly into the kind of psychological state required for practice in any meditative exercise – whether Zen, tantric, or Jesuitical. Learning the physical movements is only the beginning. The mere choreography of taijiquan or karate, for instance, can be learned in a few months; mastery, achieved through the integration of physical and spiritual dimensions, requires a lifetime. Effortlessness is easy; achieving effortlessness is hard.

If martial arts is a branch of raja yoga, the methods and effects should look the same. The end or eventual purpose of such an exercise is **samadhi**, union with the object of your meditation. Whether yantric line drawings or iconic representations of saints and deities, the end point of spiritual exercise is union with that object. Martial arts, at the advanced levels, seeks the same kind of union. If one reads the traditional stories about the fights and feats of great taijiquan or Shaolin masters, one is always struck by the way combat is couched in terms of uniting with the adversary in order to borrow their own strength and use it against them or, a bit more esoterically perhaps, helping the enemy accomplish their own deepest desire – to find the ground of their being. Ueshiba Morhei, founder of Aikido, built his entire style on the philosophy that you must blend with your opponent so as to overcome the difference between you. Even in harder styles like hapkido this means joining with your opponent’s intentions, whether to help them head-first into the floor or, more compassionately, into an understanding of their own needlessly aggressive tendencies. Union with your adversary requires a profound insight into the existential nature of conflict, of difference, and dialectical resolution – physically and intellectually.

Thus, if we may at last fall back on the language of thought to describe what lies beyond it, underlying the physical gestures of breaking boards, fighting, or cultivating one’s character is a complex dialectic of self and other. This dialectical encounter creates an ambient religious context and religious potential; a teleology as spiritual as combative. For the philosophically minded, Hegel’s dialectic of self and other should come to mind or perhaps Socratic method as a therapeutic style of dialectical remediation. For the religious, wrestling with God, loving your enemies, or liberating your self by defeating your own self-generated fears, are equally sound analogies. Appropriating naturalness to open the door to effortlessness in movement, in thought, and in our relationships, lifts humans out of the fixed and fixated ego-consciousness which prevents us from an adequate mediation with our surroundings and so, finally, with ourselves.

*Mark C.E. Peterson*

**Further Reading**


See also: Chinese Traditional Concepts of Nature; Daoism; Yoga and Ecology.

**Mary in Latin America**

Throughout Latin America the Virgin Mary gains specific abilities and qualities as she interacts with the cultural history and natural forces of a particular place. Her elevated position within the Catholic Church as the Mother of God combined with the traditional iconography...
associated with Mary facilitates her versatile connection with powerful indigenous and African female deities; reproduction and fertility; earth and agriculture; the moon; serpents; water and the sea. Agricultural festivals that celebrate planting, first-fruits, and harvest frequently coincide with a local fiesta honoring a specific manifestation of the Virgin and combine ritual observance of both the moon in its different phases and the nourishing sacred soil. Alternately, manifestations of the Virgin preside over coastal festivals honoring the life-giving and life-taking powers of the sea. In order to understand the specific ways that Marian devotion engages indigenous and African Diaspora interpretations of nature throughout Latin America, we will concentrate first on Andean representations of Mary in colonial iconography and postcontact mythology, and then turn briefly to similar examples in Meso-America, Brazil, and the Caribbean.

In the Andes, the Virgin is alternately associated with Quilla, the moon and corresponding water forces such as rain, rainbows, springs and waterfalls. She is also associated with Pacha Mama, “the earth which is our mother” and accordingly, with specific volcanic mountains. In the colonial period, paintings of Mary by the Cuzco School reveal how indigenous painters attributed the Virgin's authority to her Andean connections to nature. Traditional European iconography associated with the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception drew from the Book of the Revelation of John, which describes “a woman, adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, and with the twelve stars on her head for a crown.” For Native Andean painters this iconography took on new physical shape and symbolic resonance. Artists inscribed the astronomical emblems with Andean meanings and depicted Mary as a triangular statue, a shape that linked her to the Andean volcanoes, sacred living beings that contain and control the circulation of agricultural produce, livestock and minerals. Painters enhanced this depiction of fundamental alliance to the sacred land by embellishing the Virgin's clothing with ritual meaning. Andean robes decorated with flowers and feathers associated the Virgin with Inca nobility, direct descendants of the sun and moon. Pearl necklaces linked her to the moon and the sea, and gold dangling earrings with emeralds linked her to the sun and the mountains. While her gold and jewel encrusted halo replicated Incaic representations of the sun, the crescent moon at Mary's feet reinforced her association to the Coya, the sister/wife of the Inca and daughter of the moon. This iconography unveiled the ways that Native Andeans viewed the Virgin Mary's authority as rooted in the sacred land and animated by astronomical forces. It also affirmed her authority through Andean forms of ritual expression, thereby maintaining traditional Andean social structures of sacred power.

In the Andes, post-colonial origin myths attribute Mary's authority directly to her alliances with the Andean land. Typically, these stories recount how a local manifestation of the Virgin appeared at a sacred spring, river, waterfall or ravine. The origin stories parallel pre-Colombian accounts of the birth of the w'akas – indigenous nature deities who became the ancestors and later transformed into mountains, springs, rivers, ravines, trees or stones. In Southeast Ecuador, for example, Nuestra Señora del Rosario de Agua Santa de Baños is known for presiding over healing thermal pools and for protecting the town of Baños from the violent eruptions of the nearby Volcano Tungurahua. Local myths relate that this Virgin, born from a sacred waterfall, leaves the basilica’s altar at night in order to bathe in Tungurahua’s springs. In the Andes, ritual bathing in sacred springs, which are viewed as the eyes of the living mountain body, can impart spiritual authority to yuchajes or shamans granting them the power to heal and to negotiate with mountain spirits. Accordingly, the mythic explanation for the Virgen de Agua Santa’s abilities to heal and protect her devotees arises directly from the yuchaje-like pact that she makes with Tungurahua through bathing. In this agricultural region the primary festivals honoring the Virgen de Agua Santa fall alternately in October, a month of drought, and February, a month of excessive rains.

Throughout Mesoamerica, Marian devotion engages the specific geomythic and ritual history of the Aztecs, Mayas, Otomis, Huichols, and Tzutujils, among others. Mexico's most renowned Virgin, La Virgen de Guadalupe, appeared on 9 December 1531 to the Indian Juan Diego on Tepeyac hill near a shrine to the Aztec fertility goddess, Chihuaaoatl-Tonantzin. Aztec pilgrimages to Tepeyac had formed part of pre-Colombian rainmaking rituals that consisted of travel to water-holding hills around Teno-chtitlan. Aztecs referred to Chihuaaoatl-Tonantzin as “Our Lady Mother” and believed that she had helped to create the human race. They associated Chihuaaoatl or Snake Woman with deer and adversity. The dark skinned Virgin told Juan Diego her name was María Coatlalopeuh. Coatl is the Nahuaatl name for serpent and lopeuh means “the one who has dominion over serpents.” Today in central Mexico, devotees still refer to images of the Virgin Mary as Tonatzin. In other parts of Mexico devotees associate the Virgin with Chalchiuhuhtlicue, the goddess of water; Xilonen, the goddess of tender maize, a symbol for fertility and rejuvenation; and Chicomecoatl, the goddess of sustenance. In the uplands of Morelos, native ritualists plant crosses, which they associate with Mary and maize, as a means of attracting rain to their crops. This contemporary cult of the crosses parallels pre-Colombian celebrations for Chicomecoatl.

In Brazil and the Caribbean, Catholic devotees of the African diaspora associate the Virgin Mary with a variety of African goddesses. Practitioners of Candomblé and Santería correlate Mary Star of the Sea, Our Lady of Regla, and Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, to Yemaya
the Mother of Waters, fish, and all of the orisha. As the goddess of the ocean, Yemaya represents creativity and ancient wisdom and, as such, is associated with the full moon and the planet Neptune. Like Mary her colors are sky blue and white. She is associated with silver and is symbolically represented by a six-pointed star or an open shell. In Brazil, on New Year’s Eve, Candomblé practitioners create elaborate beach-front altars with food and candles. As the ocean waves consume the offerings, Yemaya accepts her devotees’ gifts and washes away their troubles with the waters of creation.

For Cuban practitioners of Santería, the Yoruban orisha Ochún appears in cross-dress as Nuestra Señora de la Caridad de Cobre, Cuba’s patron saint. In 1628 a wooden image of La Virgen de la Caridad first appeared to Caridad de Cobre, Cuba’s patron saint. In 1628 a wooden image of La Virgen de la Caridad first appeared to los tres Juanes, two Native Cubans and an African slave rowing in a storm. The statue was taken to a church but continually disappeared and reappeared under an orange tree in the copper-mining town of Cobre. Ochún, the orisha linked to La Virgen de la Caridad, is the orisha of sweet water and the goddess of love, marriage and motherhood. She is associated with the new crescent moon and the planet Venus, with the metals copper and gold, and the color yellow. To celebrate Ochún/La Virgen de la Caridad, devotees make offerings of honey, cinnamon or oranges on riverbanks or near waterfalls.

In Haiti, Vodou practitioners link Mary to a group of female love spirits known as Ezili who express and amplify different aspects of Mary. Lasyrenn, one of the Ezili, is Queen of the Ocean and appears as a mermaid or whale and, like Ochún, appears as La Virgen de la Caridad. As mistress of the underwater world, Lasyrenn “links ancient African senses of woman power and water power” (McCarthy Brown 1991: 220–25).

Lisa Maria Madera

Further Reading
See also: Andean Traditions; Aztec Religion – Pre-Columbian; Cihuacoatl; Mesoamerican Deities; Serpents and Dragons; Virgin of Guadalupe; Volcanoes.

Masons, Fraternal Order of

The Fraternal Order of Masons is an international mutual-aid association of men dedicated to ethical refinement. Masons are organized locally as “lodges,” into which prospective Masons are initiated. More commonly known as “Freemasonry,” the order includes a wide number of organizations, some of whom have rival claims to the tradition. Freemasonry’s likely origins are in the medieval guilds of builders and stoneworkers. Masonic lore also claims origin in the Knights Templar, a medieval military and religious order that was suppressed in the early fourteenth century by the Roman Church under charges of heresy, and a tradition going back to the original Temple of the Hebrew Scriptures. Scholars locate the genesis of the contemporary fraternal order with the founding of the London Grand Lodge in 1717. The London Grand Lodge bound together several other British lodges, and eventually became the defining body for orthodox Freemasonry around the world. Importantly, it presented to the world an association of gentlemen rather than a craft guild, and carried specific ethical and spiritual teachings, as well as the basic initiations that define most Masonry to date.

The historian Margaret Jacob argues strongly for the importance of Freemasonry in creating the culture of the eighteenth century. This is less because of membership in the Order by some Enlightenment philosophers as because Freemasonry helped foster a social milieu of popular adherence to that philosophical movement. With its mythology based around the building of the Temple of Solomon, it envisioned God as a grand architect who constructed the world as a monument to his glory. This coordinated well with the Newtonian mechanistic understanding of the world that had become popular within the Enlightenment and through the scientific revolution. Masons saw a spiritual order to nature that they felt should be the foundation for an ethical life of harmony and virtue. This was a spiritual life lived in the world, not apart from it. While the environmental results of this mechanistic worldview brought it into question by the late twentieth century, Newtonian science and the Enlightenment undeniably turned toward nature as inspiration for ethical behavior rather than as a source of sin. Freemasonry developed a body of lore, communicated in its rituals and lectures that carried these ideas to a wide population and ensured their persistence.

Freemasonry also aligned with the Enlightenment in its concept of universal human brotherhood and coordinate emphasis on religious tolerance. Although charity was initially directed toward other Masons, its focus quickly broadened to include non-Masons as well. At the same time, the notion of Masonic brotherhood as emblematic of a more universal brotherhood between humans grew in popularity. While Masonry carries religious and spiritual teachings, it maintains that Masons are free to participate
in whatever religion they feel called to. Masons are discouraged from discussing their religious convictions within the Lodge to avoid internal division. Both of these attributes echo the Enlightenment universalism that created the context for ethics of global unity that remains with us in the twenty-first century. As with the spread of naturist ideas of order, Masonry helped propagate these Enlightenment ideals beyond a small cadre of intellectuals.

The esoteric aspects of Western spirituality were also transmitted through Freemasonry. While the London Grand Lodge held a Stoic, Newtonian understanding of the world, esoteric traditions like Rosicrucianism were incorporated in seventeenth-century Scottish Freemasonry, the “Ancient” wing of eighteenth-century British Freemasonry, and continental Freemasonry. These esoteric traditions of Freemasonry shared with the Newtonians an admiration of the harmony and order of nature, but they taught a more alchemical and vitalistic understanding of that order. With their roots in ancient cosmology and Neoplatonism, the esoteric traditions visualized the world as a living inspited organism rather than as a mechanical construction. During the eighteenth century, continental esoteric Masonry grew in two strains—one following a mystiology of Templar origin and the other of Rosicrucian mysticism. Both sets of traditions developed by adding “upper” degrees of initiation over the three basic initiations of Masonry (commonly known as “Blue Lodge” degrees). The exemplar of the Templar rites was “Strict Observance” Masonry, which carried the romantic grandeur of medieval knighthood and mystical Christian symbolism. The leading Rosicrucian tradition, called the Order of the Golden and Rosy Cross, arose in the mid-eighteenth century in Germany. In contrast to Templar Masonry, it gravitated to a more alchemical and magical mysticism, and was stripped of chivalric mythology. While the order eventually died off, many of its teachings were subsumed into other initiatic societies (the Golden Dawn’s heritage is in the Golden and Rosy Cross) which preserved the vitalistic traditions of Western science and magic by creating a social context for their study and pursuit apart from the increasingly popular mechanized cosmology of the scientific revolution. Esoteric freemasonry provided a key component to the occult revival of the twentieth century and its transmitting of a vitalistic cosmology to movements like contemporary Paganism and naturopathic medicine.

Although Masonry continues in the contemporary world, it serves primarily as a conservative social force. While its teachings of tolerance and harmony remain, the more radical aspects of its spirituality have been taken up by other popular and philosophical movements. Having suffered heavy persecution throughout its history for its supposed overinvolvement in politics, today Freemasonry primarily serves as a social fraternity emphasizing its core values of fraternity and ethical refinement among its members. By all accounts, the focus of Masonic ethics remains on charity and civic works. Despite the Masonic part in spreading the ideologies that would foster respect for nature in the West, Masons have yet to play a substantial role in the contemporary environmental movement.

Further Reading
See also: Deism; Golden Dawn; Paganism – Contemporary; Western Esotericism.

Masowe Wilderness Apostles

The Masowe Apostolic movement is made up of many religious communities that originated in colonial Southern Rhodesia during the 1930s and have become widely known in southern and central Africa. Distinguished by white robes and worshipping in open-air venues that they call masowe, meaning “wilderness,” these African Apostles can be seen anywhere in fringe places by the roadside, behind factories, on the edge of fields, on hilltops, near lakes, on rock surfaces, in grasslands, under trees, etc. Buildings are avoided for ritual purposes because of the belief that the Holy Spirit comes through the wind and must blow freely through the atmosphere. Today, this form of vernacular Christianity has a membership of approximately five million people in southern and central Africa alone.

Through the symbolic act of going to pray out-of-doors, the Wilderness Apostles also see themselves as stepping outside zvinhu zvechirungu, meaning symbols of Western culture that they associate with human folly and immoral behavior. Although toilets and fences are becoming common features that gradually bring about a sense of the permanence of the sacred wilderness, the general pattern has been to declare the quest for freedom of the human spirit in sacred venues that contrast with the European missionary model of Church.

In addition to the tradition of spending long hours praying in the open air as a way of registering discontent
with a modernity supported by missionary Christianity that believers are forced to grapple with in wider society, Wilderness Apostles are known for migrating from the country of their origins in Zimbabwe, to South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania and Kenya. Werbner describes this trend in the African Apostles thought pattern as a way of using the biblical idea of “exile” to communicate a quest for liberation from an oppressive social order. He relates the experience of oppression to the quest for freedom and transcendence through an insistence on prayers held in fringe places bereft of any enclosure and lacking permanence.

Such is the social reality in Africa today, however, that it is imperative to see beyond the stories of African protest against colonialism and biblical imagery. Women and children are so visible in the sacred wilderness that it is important to articulate the nature of their oppression and their language of resistance in relation to the landscape. Jules-Rosette has drawn attention to ritual activities among the Maranke Apostles originating from the same setting, but with its own history. She observed as I have subsequently done among the Masowe Apostles that women are the ceremonial leaders because they exercise certain important mystical powers and spiritual gifts. This argument can be taken a stage further by relating the ceremonial function of women to their experiences and conceptual understanding of nature. For a start, the open air is the most natural environment for women to pray and exercise mystical powers. Women spend many long hours each day working in the fields, fetching water and firewood, collecting fruit and vegetables and so on in the background culture. These chores explain not only the marginality of women through a relationship forged with nature, but also the existence of a female-oriented knowledge system whereby nature is held sacred as the Mother of all living creatures. The sacred wilderness thus takes on a special meaning for women who experience oppression by being subjugated as if they were a part of nature and are filled with a quest for transcendence based on an understanding of nature as sacred.

However, patriarchal attitudes are so pervasive in southern and central Africa that, even in this movement of liberation, men refuse to consider women for official leadership. At the same time, they respect their vital role as mediators of divine truths and executors at healing ceremonies. The male clientele of the Wilderness movement also join women in their special quest for emancipation from the male ancestors. For instance, all members of the sacred wilderness drop their lineage names and call each other by their first names only. This is to avoid invoking the ancestors and to allow for a greater sense of equality among believers in the agreement that the ancestors are ignorant of the ways of God and, as a result, are to be exorcised through prayer. The rejection of the ancestors, who are the pillar of the man-led traditional family, and the burden it puts on women in the background culture as crop-producers, child-bearers, and hunter-gatherers roaming the rivers and forests, prompted this new definition of the sacred wilderness as being in some profound sense associated with women despite the official leadership.

It is not surprising that women who have always worked closely with the elements of nature to please the patrilineal ancestors are attracted to a movement that dramatizes resistance to oppression and even rejects the ancestors to whom women are beholden subjects by having rituals in the open air. Daneel observed that in the Mwari (high god) religion among the Shona, Earth is not just a place for men to have dominion, but in creation mythology Earth is feminine and divine, with her creative power being that of generating and nurturing life through the rains which is equated with women giving birth to children. The soil, water and the wind and the woman’s womb are key ideas used in creation myths to interpret the coming to being of living creatures in a world that begins with all living creatures coexisting harmoniously. Women are thus attracted to the Wilderness movement because their quest for transcendence takes them beyond the colonialists, missionaries, and the male ancestors to a spiritual freedom that respects the pre-Christian conceptualization of Earth as feminine in the Mwari religion.

Consequently, Masowe women in the sacred wilderness excel as healers (i.e., people filled with the spirit that restores life and causes barren women to give birth again while encouraging good morals and peaceful living). Furthermore, the use of earthenware bowls filled with water, stones, clay or leaves, milk and sometimes oil, is consistent with them as children made in the image of Mother Earth. These objects, held in association with the manifestation of the Holy Spirit during healing ceremonies and exorcisms of evil spirits among the Wilderness Apostles are direct reminders of Earth as Mother and life-giver in Shona mythology.

Finally, the Apostles hold the Earth sacred and their venues of prayer are usually chosen because they are deemed uninhabited – open and not as yet spoiled by man. One of the reasons that the communities disappear from the landscape in a city such as Harare, and reappear elsewhere, is largely determined by the wish for prayer in environments where human beings have not destroyed trees and grasslands by putting up buildings. Although it is again becoming common to see toilets built for sanitation purposes, and pressure is being put on Apostles to build churches and thus to bureaucratize, the Apostles could teach us about preserving life on Earth. By using the landscape to construct a sacred wilderness in which one leaves the trees, grass and rivers flowing is a beautiful illustration of how human beings could rethink their relationship to nature as one of sharing, rather than manipulating and destroying. Occasionally, the Apostles
have been known to destroy rock paintings when they have gone into the mountains to pray (Domboshava, Harare). This is because they see rock paintings as direct reminders of the ancestors whom they regard as evil, and are therefore at war with, in the sacred wilderness. Otherwise, the Wilderness movement is guardian to an eco-theology that has yet to be fully articulated.

In summary, somewhere in the background world of Masowe believers is a religious heritage whereby Earth is gendered, divine, and necessarily part of any discourse on religion and nature. In the vernacular Christianity represented by the Masowe Apostles the sacred wilderness is filled with large numbers of female adherents and fewer men, where lessons are taught about the uses of space by people who have always had an intimate relationship with nature and who have shown their discontent with colonialism and traditional African patriarchal culture, and who continue to wrestle with the effects of both in today's world.

Isabel Mukonyora

Further Reading


See also: African Independent Churches (South Africa); Zimbabwe Spirit Mediums; Zimbabwe’s Matopos Hills.

Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694)

Matsuo Bashō, a Japanese writer, is generally considered to be the greatest haiku poet. He was also a significant writer of literary travel journals and poetic prose (haibun), and his poetics continue to be central to Japanese aesthetic theory. In the West, he is probably the most famous and influential literary figure from pre-modern Asia. He spent much of the last ten years of his life traveling through Japan, and his writings and poetics are filled with references to the natural world. Part of the richness of his view of nature comes from the multiplicity of traditions he drew from: Buddhism (both elite and popular), Daoism, Neo-Confucianism, Shinto, the Chinese literary tradition, and Japanese literature and art. As a result, his writings manifest a complex view of nature that differs from those found in the West.

Bashō’s view of nature was dominated by the notion of change. One type of change is found in the “Creative” (Japanese: ぞか; Chinese: zaohua), an idea he adopted from the Chinese. ぞか is sometimes translated as “nature,” but it refers not to nature as scenery or as individual beings but rather the creativity that brings them forth and leads them through ongoing transformations. It is also sometimes translated as the “Creator,” but ぞか is not a being separate from nature. Rather it is nature’s own spontaneous and wondrous skill at creating and reshaping beauty. We can translate ぞか as “the Creative,” which makes what we call nature a continuously renewing work of art within which we live.

Another form of change is the turning of the seasons. Japanese literature, especially haiku, involves sensitive attunement to the particular season and to the process of seasonal change. We never experience “nature,” but always nature in and of a particular season. Thus all haiku poems are supposed to have a “season word” that indicates the time of year. While ぞか involves creative and unpredictable change, this seasonal change is an ordered pattern, a yearly recurrence that can be anticipated and even conventionalized in “season words,” poetic words that indicate the season of the poem.

A third type of change found in Bashō’s writings was heavily influenced by Buddhism. Mujō, “impermanence,” suggests the inevitable passing away of things. Mujō-kan, the “feeling of impermanence,” was sorrowful but at the same time tranquil, because it resulted from a realization and acceptance of the nature of the universe. It is a condition all things share and so we all are wayfarers through life. His great travel journal, The Narrow Road to the Deep North, begins,

Months and days are wayfarers of a hundred generations, the years too, going and coming, are wanderers. For those who drift life away on a boat, for those who meet age leading a horse by the mouth, each day is a journey, the journey itself home (Imoto, et al. 1972: 341).

For Bashō, nature is vitalistic. Just as the natural world as a whole is characterized by change, individual things
are alive with qi (the Chinese notion of the vitality of things) and have “feelings.” We too have qi and feelings, and this enables us to experience a union with the natural world. Part of the poet’s task is to lose the sense of a separate self and become intimate with the object to be written about. In The Red Booklet, written by his disciple Tohō (1657–1730), Bashō is quoted as saying, “the mind’s movements merge with the object . . . [which] is taken in its nature, without obstruction . . . Learn of the pine from the pine, learn of the bamboo from the bamboo.” Tohō explained this notion of “learning” as follows: “In other words, one must become detached from the self . . . To learn means to enter into the object and feel the subtlety that is revealed there.” As a result, “the color of the mind becomes the object” and one “can identify with the feelings of the things in nature . . .” (Ijichi, et al. 1973: 547–8).

While individual things have their own subtle feelings, the universe as a whole is characterized by an essential quality, sabi (“loneliness”) that a true poet is able to experience. The universe is immense in both space and time, and sabi refers to a feeling of being small and fleeting within a vast cosmos. Like mujō-kan, this feeling is characterized by inner tranquility, for it grounds us in the fundamental condition of reality shared by all.

Bashō’s notion of nature also differs from ours because of its conventional nature. Like any other poet in Japan, he saw the natural world through the eyes of culture. Particularly important are what we might call “embedded associations.” A bush warbler, for instance, is considered a bird of early spring because it is one of the first birds to sing in the new year (i.e., the lunar year, which normally began around early February). As such it is also associated with another image of early spring, plum blossoms. In addition its song is not only considered beautiful but is said to sound like the title of the Lotus Sutra (Hokke-kyō). All of these meanings are embedded in the one word, uquisu. However, the bush warbler is actually a common year-round resident throughout Japan, and it sings in other seasons beside early spring.

Such a conventionalized view has led to the conclusion that Bashō and other Japanese poets did not write of “real” nature but only an artificial, culturalized version of nature. However, we need to realize that different assumptions about nature are at work in Bashō’s writings. One is that plants, animals, and even natural scenes have a “true nature,” just as humans do. A bush warbler, a pine, a moment of late-autumn dusk when the light fades behind silhouetted trees: they are not mere objects but are characterized by certain qualities that make them distinctive. One can appreciate the true nature of a bush warbler most fully as it sings in early spring with the plum blossoms in bloom; if we want to see the true nature of a pine we should look to an aged pine on a cliff-edge; and a scene of late dusk in autumn (aki no kure) is by its nature lonely. The Japanese held to an idea of “poetic essences” (hon’i) that captured the true nature of a thing and could be handed down in the literary tradition. Similarly there were utamakura, famous places that were characterized by certain qualities and even a particular season, and references to those places were expected to refer to those accepted associations.

A second assumption is that the natural world and the experience of nature are not wholly distinct: our objective-subjective distinction does not hold. A true poet is one who has cultivated his sensibility to the point that his “subjective” feelings match the “objective” feelings in the scene being experienced. Sabi, for instance, is a quality inherent in a scene as well as a feeling experienced by the refined poet.

A third assumption is that there are authoritative experiences of nature. Some experiences of nature are “truer” – more deeply insightful of the essential nature of things – than others. We can look to the experiences of great poets of the past and to literary conventions derived from them as guides for what can and should be experienced when we see a bird, tree, or scene.

A fourth assumption is that nature and culture are deeply interrelated. Bashō’s sense of this interrelationship can be seen in the famous passage in which he says that:

One thread runs through all the artistic Ways. And this aesthetic spirit is to follow the Creative (zōka), to be a companion to the turning of the four seasons. Nothing one sees is not a flower, nothing one imagines is not the moon. If what is seen is not a flower, one is like a barbarian; if what is imagined is not a flower, one is like a beast. Depart from the barbarian, break away from the beast, follow the Creative, return to the Creative (Imoto, et al. 1972: 311–12).

The barbarian and beast are those without culture. They are also those who have lost contact with nature’s creativity. Highly refined culture such as poetry is at root a natural expression of human feelings. Poetry is not essentially different from birdsong and is, in fact, our own form of zōka. This will happen only, however, if artists create out of their deepest nature, in concert with the creativity of nature itself. So poetry must arise spontaneously out of authentic feelings and our true nature. It is culture that allows this to take place. The greatest poet, then, is not only the most cultured but also the most natural, because to be fully cultured is to follow the processes of nature. It is “barbarians and beasts” – those devoid of culture – that are far from nature. “Culturized nature,” perceived with deep cultural insight into nature, is “true nature.”

David Landis Barnhill
Further Reading
See also: Aesthetics and Nature in China and Japan; Buddhism – East Asian; Chinese Traditional Concepts of Nature; Daoism; Japanese Gardens; Japanese Love of Nature; Japanese Religions; Zen Buddhism.

Matthiessen, Peter (1927–)

Peter Matthiessen is a novelist and essayist born and raised in New York City in an affluent family. After graduating from Yale in 1950, he moved to Paris, where he co-founded the Paris Review. In 1953 he returned to the U.S. and became a commercial fisherman for several years before becoming a full-time writer. He has traveled extensively on nature expeditions while making his home in Long Island, New York.

Matthiessen’s writings evidence four major concerns: wild nature, particularly threatened species and ecosystems; cultures rooted in nature but marginalized by encroaching civilization; contemporary issues of social justice, particularly with regard to Native Americans; and Zen Buddhist spirituality. While the majority of his works are non-fiction, he also has published eight novels, his preferred genre. His combination of nature writing, anthropological inquiry, social critique, and spirituality is reminiscent of Gary Snyder’s works, although social criticism rarely enters into his nature writing. Matthiessen’s writings project a deep sense of the value of biological and cultural diversity and an underlying tone of melancholy concerning the devastation brought by encroaching civilization. He also avoids a romantic view. Traditional peoples of various cultures exhibit widely different characters, some of which are far from anyone’s ideal. And nature can be dreary, difficult, and dangerous.

Matthiessen’s range of interests leads to various types of writing. Some works are clearly natural history (e.g., Wildlife in America and The Shorebirds of North America), which may either be a narrative of personal experience of nature or a more objective account. Many of his works are in the tradition of travel literature (e.g., Cloud Forest and The Tree Where Man Was Born), which often include a sense of adventure as he learns about nature and cultures in foreign lands. Still other works (e.g., Sal Si Puedes and In the Spirit of Crazy Horse) are social criticism. Spiritual autobiography is found in The Snow Leopard and Nine-headed Dragon River.

Matthiessen is also an accomplished novelist. His early fiction (1954–61: Race Rock, Partisans, and Raditzer) were bildungsroman about coming of age. From the 1960s to the 1980s he published primarily in non-fiction, but in that period he produced arguably his finest, and most ecological, novels: At Play in the Fields of the Lord (1965) and Far Tortuga (1975). At Play takes place in South America (and was informed by the same trip that lead to Cloud Forest). In the novel, Protestant missionaries battle the Catholics, the jungle, and the natives in their disastrous attempt to convert local Indians. The rainforest functions as a major actor in the narrative as well as an abiding presence that dwarfs the tragicomic human play. Far Tortuga explores the lives of a disappearing breed of turtle fishermen in the Caribbean who try to extract an old-style living in the face of modernization. Far Tortuga is an experimental novel influenced by Zen and haiku poetics in the extreme sparseness of presentation and the use of empty spaces in the text. In the 1990s Matthiessen has again focused on fiction with a trilogy set primarily in the Everglades: Killing Mr. Watson, Lost Man’s River, and Bone by Bone.

The Snow Leopard (1978), which won the National Book Award, is generally considered his most significant work. In 1973 Matthiessen journeyed to Nepal with the zoologist George Schaller, not long after his wife and fellow Zen Buddhist had died. Schaller’s research centered on the Himalayan blue sheep, but both Schaller and Matthiessen were fascinated by the elusive Snow Leopard. Matthiessen’s book chronicles the extremely challenging expedition in which the presence of the great cat was felt but never directly encountered, like Buddhist enlightenment itself. He combined natural history and cultural observations, exquisite descriptions of austere beauty (often using haiku-like techniques in his prose), and reflections on his spiritual pilgrimage. At times Matthiessen achieves a state of “transparency,” in which the self and the world are no longer separate and the true meaning of mountains and rivers is revealed as their simple but absolute presence within the moment. What is required – and so difficult – is to lose desires, fears, and expectations and
to let go of clinging, including attachment to spiritual achievement. In moments of open stillness, the “ringing silence” that permeates the natural world can be experienced. After finishing this book, Matthiessen continued his Zen practice and received official recognition as an enlightened master.

David Landis Barnhill

Further Reading

See also: Autobiography; Memoir and Nature Writing; Zen Buddhism.

Maya Religion (Central America)

The culture that we now call Maya still occupies the southern states of Mexico (Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo), and the territories of Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. The Mayas are well known to the world because of their cultural, religious and scientific achievements in ancient times. The best-known period is the Classic Maya, which comprises various centuries of history (250–900). It is from the Classic Maya that we have received most of the information about ancient religion and spirituality in the Mesoamerican region. No doubt, much of this religious belief system was destroyed during the Spanish conquest and subsequent colonization of the Mayas. Fortunately, not everything was lost, since Maya leaders maintained their spirituality passing on religious beliefs to new generations through the oral tradition. This is how the Popol Vuh, the most important and sacred book of the Mayas, was written immediately after the conquest.

The Classic Maya have been studied extensively and from these anthropological and religious studies we have a better understanding of this great civilization. Unfortunately, the Mayas lost their written tradition when the last ones who knew how to read and write hieroglyphic texts were punished by Spanish missionaries during the early sixteenth century. Fortunately, some of the sacred texts were memorized by the spiritual leaders and this is how the Maya ceremonies and prayers have continued until now. For example, among the Tzotzil Maya, the recitation of sacred texts during their religious ceremonies and festivals is still common today, while there is resistance by those converted to Protestantism.

We can argue that the Mayas may have had a state religion during the Classic Maya period because of the abundance of sacred sites in the Maya region. Also, there is an abundance of written religious texts such as the works of the Chilam Balam or Jaguar Priest in Yucatan. Most of the iconography at the sacred Maya sites show the connection of rulers with mythical ancestors and the supernatural world. Referring to these sacred sites, the Temple of the Cross in Palenque is a major shrine which is considered the center of the world and where the Lacandon Maya have continued to perform sacred ceremonies in modern times (Perera 1982).

Despite the existence of many hieroglyphic texts explaining these events, we cannot fully interpret these messages. Thus, from the writing of early missionaries we learned that Maya spirituality was condemned as witchcraft or the teaching of the devil, so it had to be eradicated. Even in modern times, epigraphers have misinterpreted and confused Maya spirituality with animism. Thus the worldview of indigenous people in which they see Earth as a living entity and plants and animals as having the spirit of creation is seen as evidence of a lack of rationality among the Indians.

On the other hand, the bishop of Yucatan Diego de Landa (1566) also mentioned the Maya sciences and the religious training of spiritual leaders before the conquest. According to Landa, the Maya priests or Ah-q’inh were in charge of teaching and guiding the people in their sciences, writing, divination and the interpretation of signs from the sky and the natural world for their prophecies.

Also, the Maya priests were experts in the Maya calendar and the counting of the days, months and the years. They played the role of scholars, teachers and spiritual leaders who promoted Maya knowledge and the appropriate ways of acting and dealing with the supernatural and the natural world. The celebration of a series of festivities in accordance with the Maya calendar has continued until now, sometimes as a syncretic religious practice. For example, the present cult of the patron saints in Maya towns and villages is central to Maya religion today. The persistence of religious beliefs among contemporary Mayas shows us the deep spirituality that they have inherited from their ancestors.

In terms of the relationship between humans and their natural environment, the Maya creation myths in the Popol Vuh provide us with complex religious and philosophical ideas. According to the Mayas, the Earth and heaven were connected and the divinity, too, was not separated from humans and the environment. Thus, for the present Mayas, there are sacred places, such as mountains,
Maya creation myths explain the integration or inter-relationship that must exist between humans, plants and animals for their collective survival. For this reason, most indigenous scholars make a distinction between religion and spirituality. What we know today is that the natural world has been the focal point of Mayan spirituality. Mayas; as with other indigenous people of the continent, have developed sacred ceremonies for an appropriate relationship with Earth and the supernatural world.

One of the major continuities in Maya religion or spirituality is the use of the sacred Maya calendar. The calendar was used extensively during the Classic Maya period as it is exemplified in the codices and other hieroglyphic written materials of the Mayas. The practice did not disappear, but was continued; sometimes secretly because of the persecution of the religious Maya leaders by Church authorities in the past. The uses of the Maya calendar were related to the omens and prophecies of the day and the different time cycles such as the tun (year) and the k’altun, or prophetic cycle of twenty years. The calendar was also related to agriculture, as the Mayas were very respectful of the natural world and needed to perform ceremonies before cutting the trees and preparing the land for planting.

In modern Maya communities there are experts in divination and in the uses of the calendar. These experts or spiritual leaders are called ajq’ij, currently known as Maya priests. Their role in modern Maya culture is to maintain the sacred tradition of counting the days, divining the best time to perform rituals and for the giving of names to new-born children. The ajq’ij have been persecuted in recent times as they are still carrying the sacred knowledge of the past. During the past decade (1990s), the ajq’ij organized themselves openly in a National Association of Maya Priests or ajq’ijab. After remaining secluded and performing their rituals almost secretly, they have decided to bring to light their knowledge and religious practices. They needed to continue their sacred mission, despite the criticism by Catholic and Protestant missionaries who accuse them of continuing paganism and idolatry. Truly, the sacred tradition of the Mayas and the role of the ajq’ij have not been understood properly until now.

In this religious practice that includes the natural world we can mention the Mayas’ concern for corn. Corn was perhaps the most important product of the Mayas; peasants still believe that corn has a spirit and it has to be treated with respect as a gift from the ancestors. Among the Jakaltek Maya, corn is called “komí: ixim,” (mother corn) since it gives life and nourishment to humanity. Many people wrongly suppose that the Maya have multiple gods and that corn is also a god. But for the Mayans, each part of creation such as plants and animals have their own spirit and they contribute to the existence of the whole. In this way, the corn plant provides nourishment to humans and it has been the source of their strength and life. According to the Popol Vuh, the first four fathers created were made of white and yellow corn. ‘The corn used to create the first men was found in the place called Paxil and K’ayala’. Yak the wildcat, Utiu the coyote, K’el the parrot and Joj the crow, were the creatures who discovered this food” (Popol Vuh, Montejo 2000).

It is appropriate to mention that in most Mayan linguistic communities, there are still traditionalists who continue to practice their ceremonies following the counting of the days from the Maya calendar. There are good and bad omen days, as well as days that are appropriate to pray for human health, for nature and animals, as well as for giving thanks to the Creator for the gift of life and the beauty of Earth that we humans enjoy and must protect.

The calendar was also used to commemorate the ancestors in each Maya community, so among the Jakaltek maya, Imox and Q’ana’ are two day names, but they are also the names of the ancestors, or first Mother and Father, of the Jakaltek Maya. In ancient Maya religion, the pilgrimages to the shrine of the ancestors have been practiced by the tribes according to the Popol Vuh. Similarly, among the Jakaltek Maya of highland Guatemala there has been a continuous pilgrimage to the sanctuary of B’alunh Q’ana and Imox. In most recent times, this has become a symbolic practice during the Maya New Year, during which the spirits of the children and the adults are thought to go to salute the ancestors in their shrine, located at the edge of the Blue River in the Cuchumatan Mountains.

The continuity of Maya religion is then evident in the religious practice called Waxajib Batz or Maya New Year among the Mayas of highland Guatemala, particularly the Kaqchikel and K’iche. This is the sacred time of renewal when the new fire is lighted, recharging life on Earth and the universe. The Waxajib Batz has become one of the most important ceremonies of the modern Mayas,
reaffirming their continuous presence and practice of their ancient sacred heritage.

During the colonial time, the Mayans were persecuted because of this religious practice. Some ajq’ij were jailed and persecuted by religious and civilian authorities. Just as Diego de Landa burned the books of the Mayas in Yucatan and punished the practitioners of the ancient Maya religion, the religious leaders of the Mayan communities were also persecuted and punished up until the first half of the twentieth century. In most places the eradication of the Maya ceremonies was successful as Maya spiritual leaders were jailed and fiercely persecuted by the Catholic Church and Protestant missionaries.

Most of Maya religion and spirituality practiced today is a syncretic expression or mixture of Maya beliefs and Christian religion. Most of these Christian elements were integrated into Maya beliefs and ceremonies because they were similar to those that Mayas were already practicing. For example the cult for the saints brought to Mayan communities by Catholic missionaries was similar to that of the owners or guardians of the hills. The Mayans considered that the hills and the mountains had spiritual owners who were the guardians of animals and plants inhabiting the mountains. The cult to these spirit guardians was strong, so when the Spanish priests brought the saints to the Mayan communities as patron saints, they were easily accommodated within the Maya worldview and religious beliefs.

Perhaps the relationship between religion and the natural world is the most important attribute of Maya religion. In the case of the cross, before cutting a big tree for the purposes of making a cross, the tree is interviewed or consulted by the ahb’eh or diviner. The tree will respond if he or she is ready or not to fulfill a mission to protect a whole community. The cross, then, talks and acts as a “person,” according to Maya beliefs. This is quite different from the concept or meaning of the cross as a sacred symbol in Catholic religion.

Similarly, before cutting the trees for cultivating corn, the farmer will burn candles and ask permission to the owner or spirit of the hill for his forgiveness. According to Maya religious beliefs, Witz, the owner of the hills, is placed there by God to protect and be the guardian of plants and animals. Thus, humans do not have the supremacy or total freedom to do whatever they want against nature. The rivers too are considered roads to heaven and humans must not pollute them. Anyone who does so pays the penalty of not being accepted into heaven when they die. The spirit will be sent back to Earth to search for the dirt that the person has thrown into the river thus polluting it or the ocean. These are ecological myths that reinforce human behaviour and respect for nature as a sacred part of creation.

These ecological knowledge and practices still exist among the Mayans in modern times. Some of this traditional knowledge is being sought by ecologists or members of the environmental movement. While the researchers look for the sacred knowledge of the Mayas for ecological purposes, they certainly do not understand the deep spiritual belief of the indigenous people who have been living in close contact with and respectfully toward their environment.

Currently, the traditional religious leaders are worried that some foreigners who appropriate Maya knowledge of the sacred, such as the Maya calendar, are becoming shamans themselves. These are members of the New Age movement and are currently called by some indigenous people “white-shamans” or “plastic medicine men and women.” In this case, instead of destroying Maya spirituality, as early foreign missionaries did, these New Age people appropriate it for the purpose of making a profit, as they claim to be experts of Maya religion.

In the current revitalization of Maya culture, the role of religion and Maya spirituality has been very significant. Mayan priests or ajq’ij are showing the world that their beliefs are still alive and that they are not ashamed to practice their spirituality. Despite being persecuted for centuries, and criticized or condemned as devil-worshippers and promoters of idolatry, the Maya priests are now performing their ceremonies in public places. They are reclaiming their rights to practice their religion at the sacred sites, such as Tikal, Copán, Palenque, etc., as they revitalize Maya religion and spirituality.

Lately, some Protestant groups have entered into Mayan communities and condemned the practices of Maya religion. During the armed conflict in Guatemala in the early 1980s, some fundamentalist religious believers came to Maya communities arguing that the Mayans would be safer if they abandoned Catholicism and were “born again.” This was the religion of the Chief of State at that time, General Efraín Ríos Montt, who stands accused of allowing massacres of entire communities in 1982. While the army persecuted the Catholic priests and catechists, the guerrilla movement too contributed to the destruction of Maya religion and spirituality. The religious roles of the elders or Principales were changed as they were seen as traditionalists and an obstacle to expansion of the guerrilla movement. Also, Catholic Action, which had a very revolutionary agenda, got rid of the traditional authorities and imposed a new form of liberation theology preached by the Church through Catholic Action.

Now, the Maya religious and spiritual leaders are revising their role as guides and leaders of the communities and are refining their role as Maya priests. Most importantly, with the signing of the peace accords on 26 December 1996, which promised freedom to practice Maya spirituality and access to sacred sites, the revitalization of Maya religion and spirituality has been strengthened. Currently, Mayan priests are working on the standardization of their religious canons and the uses of religious
symbols and paraphernalia. Not all of them are in agreement, since some are more inclined to the practice of Maya traditional religion as attached to Catholicism. In other words, the Maya priests are also Catholics and they practice both traditions equally since they believe that Maya religion complements Catholicism. Maya religion or spirituality is not something separated from Mayas’ daily life, but it pervades all Maya activities. The cyclical religious festivals and ceremonies organized by the Cofradías, or religious brotherhoods, are very good examples of the syncretic continuities of Maya religion and spirituality.

Maya religion is now going through a process of reconstruction and there are Mayans who call themselves Catholics and reject Maya costumbres or traditional religious practices, while there are also Mayas who are recognizing the need to go back to the roots of their spirituality, which though not in opposition to Christian beliefs is different because of its holistic connection to the natural and supernatural world.

Maya religion is now viewed by the government and some other religious traditions, such as Catholicism, as a shamanistic reminiscence of an ancient past. Others, mainly fundamentalist Protestants, argue it represents the continuation of paganism and idolatry, which must be eradicated to save the soul of these poor Indians. But for Mayan religious leaders, the practice of Maya ceremonies and rituals is the appropriate way of giving thanks for the life that we enjoy on this Earth. It is the continuation of the first acts of creation and responsibilities of human beings continuously to give thanks for the gift of life given to them by the Creator, according to the Popol Vuh.

This is why the attitude of indigenous people toward the environment is religious or quasi-religious, and this is what non-indigenous people must learn from indigenous people: to be more compassionate toward the creatures with whom we share our world, thinking of ourselves and the future of our generations. This is the main message of the Maya priests to their followers, and this practice will continue as part of the revitalization of Maya religion and spirituality in the Maya region, particularly Guatemala.

Victor Montejo

Further Reading

La Farge, Oliver and Douglas Byers. The Year Bearer’s People. Middle American Research Series, Publication No. 2. New Orleans: Tulane University, 1931.
See also: Harmonic Convergence; Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Mesoamerican Deities.

Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands)
The Guatemala highlands, ribbed with volcanic-formed mountain ridges, fertile plains and canyons, are carved by multiple rivers in the west and deposits of limestone terrain built up in the east. This backbone of mountain ridges varying from 4000 to over 14,000 feet in elevation, framed on both sides by a piedmont, extends from Guatemala City north and west to the Mexican border. These physically and ecologically diverse high plateaus of the western highlands, isolated valleys, and pockets of the piedmont are the geography in which the earliest entry occurred, perhaps as early as 15,000 B.C.E.; about 1500 B.C.E., sedentary village life was a cultural reality. From steep, rocky mountains to the depths of the gorges where freshwater springs tumble down, pine forests rise to meet the sky. Mists envelop mountains, enshrouding volcanic peaks. Sulfur springs steam along riverbanks; winds high in the altiplano swing through forests, knocking against the rocks. Cultivated mountainsides appear as a patchwork of green and brown striped squares, the deeply furrowed brown Earth giving birth to verdant cornfields, the long leaves and tassels tossing in the wind. Within these natural environments, inhabitants, interacting with the celestial cycles and with the land, configured the sky and the Earth not only as a
spatial territory or cultural landscape, but also as sacred and living. In this natural environment, humans have shaped consciousness, behaviors and religious systems.

Archeological sites, hieroglyphic texts, creation accounts recorded in Popol Vuh, the Ki’che’ Maya lineage and creation account, and in Chilam Balam, the lowland Maya account, in living stories and traditions, all reveal that humans living in this region have perceived that Earth and heaven are connected, and that a dynamic, animated reciprocal interaction occurs between the two. As narrated in Popol Vuh, the nature of the Creator is an enlightened being, a totality in duality, with multiple manifestations: great knowers and great thinkers in their being; Mother and Father; Alom k’ajolom, the Bearer and Begetter; B’itol Tz’akol, the Maker, the Modeler, who amassed and give form to the materials that make up the Earth, plants, animals and humans. In the account in the Popol Vuh referring to the creation of the sky and of the Earth, as genius Heart of Sky and Sovereign Plumed Serpent, who work by means of words, genius and sacrifice, think, converse, worry, and agree, they establish a rhythm of gestation deep in time, setting off the formation of the Earth, of all creation, toward their goal – the completion of their work in the human design. The work of humans is to speak, name and pray to the Heart of Sky and Sovereign Plumed Serpent, and keep the days so the Maker and Modeler will be invoked and remembered on the face of the Earth. The alive, natural world is the source, fulcrum and channel of this human work, this work of Maya spirituality. In the natural environment there is an understood interrelationship and harmony of humans, animals, and plants. Universal laws rule each living being; each creature is temporal and its period of life varies depending upon the mission that has been commissioned within the cosmos. Each being fulfills a cycle of life, to come and go, to be born and to die. While humans share the same category of creature, they have a superior being, and thus take on the responsibility to look after all, as a guardian, as an older brother or sister. The genealogy of their spirituality establishes a human position of reciprocity, gratitude and responsibility, based on observations of celestial and Earth cycles and of interrelationships in nature, ordered in rounds of time.

In trading and migrating, settling and working the land to cultivate corn, beans, and squash, inhabitants developed a relationship with their environment. Predecessors configured terrestrial landscapes, spatial cartography, and mythic narratives to mirror the celestial events of the night sky. From 250–850, architects mapped astronomical space and laid over it geography, aligning architecture, settlement patterns and ritual practice with solar, planetary and lunar events. As in other areas of Mesoamerica, the construction and layout of temple-mountains in the highlands (Abaj Takalik, Uutatlán, Uaxactun, and Zaculeu) and other cities present strikingly literal maps of the sky on dates associated with the Maya creation or with important events in each polity’s history. Time, observed, recorded on agricultural and sacred calendars, and remembered in ritual practice, was given primordial importance so that it organized social, agricultural, and religious life. Dawn, dusk, the equinoxes and the solstices at specific geographical locations were viewed as sacred; these time/spaces provided entrance to the sacred. At these sites, at designated times, people performed rituals interlocking themselves with cosmic cycles.

Human response in this lush, ecologically diverse natural environment was one of reciprocity. Material legacy, in architecture, settlement patterns, agricultural ways and ritual practice, bears witness “to repeated or recrafted strategies for acknowledging the Earth, for honoring and working with its vital forces” (Brady and Ashmore 2000: 126). Large quantities of incense burners found in caves indicate that the elite and peasants made pilgrimages to caves, considered portals to the underworld, to make offerings for rain and the fertility of the Earth. Religious practitioners smeared the blood of the victims on the face of the (stone) idols with the idea that the deities needed to be strengthened. There has been an assumed connection between bodily sacrifice – blood-letting and human sacrifice rituals – and the continuation of life processes on Earth. Precious substances such as copal incense, maize dough, rubber and jade contained soul and were burned in huge braziers where they converted to smoke, the form of sustenance the deity could understand (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993: 204). In the K’iche’ creation account, Popol Vuj, ancestors offered blends of copal honoring the first dawn.

Many of the Ki’che’, Kaqchikel, Tz’utujil, Jakaltek and Mam Maya communities residing in the highlands have maintained continuities of ancestral systems of belief and spiritual practices, distinct in each village, but in broad terms quite uniform. Beliefs and rituals of reciprocity framed within a sacred calendar system of 260 days survived the Catholic colonial period and subsequent centuries of persecution and repression in the Guatemalan highlands through strategic appropriations of Catholic practices, through clandestinely maintained rituals, but in most cases transformed through syncretism; continuities survived, in great part, because of geographical inaccessibility. Since the mid-1980s, transformed continuities of these spiritual practices have emerged publicly and have been reclaimed and revitalized.

Foundational to understanding reciprocity with the natural environment is translation of the concept “nature.” In K’iche’, the indigenous language spoken by over one million highland inhabitants, the word chomb’al juyub’ tay’j, (chomb’al = it’s alive; juyub’ = mountain; tay’aj = lowland), or “nature” in English, is interpreted as “a place of much happiness and energy” or “the happy house where I live” or “the green of the earth.” These
renderings reflect the aliveness of the environment, the underpinning construction of duality (high/low) and the warm, heartfelt affections emanating from a people’s relationship to place. *Popul Vúj* recounts the response of the first four humans when they first saw everything under the sky, “Truly now, double thanks, triple thanks that we’ve been formed...” (Tedlock 1996: 147).

In a traditional highland Maya perspective, the Earth is a territory maintained by the Owner, Ajau, (*rajaw juyub* “mountain owner”), who owns the land and everything on its surface. Ethnographic work concurs: “The face of this earth is not ours. We are just renting it for a while. We just pass through it, then we are gone” (Molesky-Poz 1999: 274). This perspective is shared among other highland people. According to the traditional Tz’utujiles around Lake Atitlán, Mam (the Earth Lord) is a proliferate sacred being that is as much “felt” by his people as an animistic presence as he is known to them as their Lord of the Earth (Stanzione 2000). Other Maya refer to the earth as *our mother.* “The earth is our mother. She gives us corn, fruits, flowers. Her waters wash us clean. At the end of our life, she opens her entrails and receives our bodies. So she must be respected and loved” (Molesky-Poz 1999: 274). Whether the Earth is understood as a territory, maintained by Ajau, the Owner, the Earth Lord, or as a *mother*, the land is alive and needs to be cared for, to be respected, to be fed. Maya belief that the universe sustains us and that as humans we have a transitory passage on Earth informs their relationship to the land. Men and women not only cultivate the Earth, but also in ritual practice, offer aromatic gifts, thanksgivings and petitions to maintain a reciprocal relation with the sacred Earth. This concept of reciprocity – that to receive something of value, you must give something of value – permeates Maya values.

As a farmer plants kernels of corn, he first exhales on the palm of his hand a “huh” prayer, asking permission to open the Earth. Before the exhumation of a mass grave to identify village members who disappeared or were murdered during the late 1970s and early 1980s, an *Ajq’ij* asks permission to open the Earth. Before a family constructs a house, the family speaks with the Earth, asking permission, explaining to the Earth their need to dig holes, to plant poles in her surface for the house’s foundation. They address the Earth,

We are just passing through this life, but we need shelter. We need a place to sleep, to be protected from the rains and from the dangers of night. Please understand us, that we are asking permission to change your face, the face of the Earth. We are only passing through (Molesky-Poz 1999: 279).

Further embedded in this worldview are beliefs concerning how particular offerings accomplish certain tasks. For example, in Cantel, people bury the hooves of a sacrificed goat in each of the four corners of the house and the head of the goat in the center as a present to the Owner of the Earth, that the foundation of the house will be stable and strong. Traditionalists of Santiago Lake Atitlán believe that as long as the Flowering Mountain Earth is “fed,” it will continue to provide sustenance. Rituals like burning copal, dancing sacred bundles, or praying can feed the ancestral form.

Foundational to understanding the spirituality emergent in the highlands is the interpretation of the word *faith* in K’iche’. *Faith* is translated as the verb *kojonik,* which can be rendered in two meanings: to put on and to believe. The first meaning of *kojonik,* putting it on, is doing the ritual work of sacrifice, of placing aromatic materials (*copal* and *pom* incense, tallow candles, chocolate, sesame, flowered water, alcohol) in the fire and through them of giving thanks, of asking pardon and permission, of petitioning Ajau. The second mien of *kojonik* is “to believe” or more carefully rendered, “the center where we connect to trust.” That is, one’s disposition, one’s faith, informed by an inner determinateness, facilitates a connection and mutual love with *B’itol Tz’akol,* the Maker, the Modeler, who is manifest in the animate potentiality of the universe, yet who is also transcendent. One way of connecting to this center is through the ceremony on a designated day on the Maya sacred calendar and at a selected sacred site.

Among the highland Maya, the *Ajq’ij* is a woman or man who understands one’s particular spiritual capacity and destiny, undergoes training, offers petitions and thanksgiving in rituals, serves their community and advises according to the sacred calendar of 260 days. Non-Maya scholars have identified them as Daykeepers, priest-shamans and shaman-priests, working people or ritual specialists who illuminate according to the Maya calendar and worldview. *Ajq’ijab’* guard the values and knowledge of the calendar, their spiritual base, and transmit it in ceremonies, in divinations with *tz’ite* seeds (*Erthrina coallordendron*) or through discerning in the “lightening in their blood,” and in conversations with persons who seek their counsel. *Ajq’ijab* who understand their lives in terms of service and responsibility to their communities, explain that ceremonies are necessary to maintain the tremendous energy that they carry and control. In the current revitalization of Maya culture, people have turned to the *Ajq’ijab’* and public ceremonies as sources of identity, community, cultural, and spiritual growth.

The 260-day calendar, the Sacred Calendar, which the K’iche’ call the *Cholq’ij,* refers to two continuous repeating cycles, the count of thirteen days and the set of twenty day-names. Each of the twenty day-names designates an attribute, an element of life; each of the numbers from one to thirteen carries a particular characteristic. The combination of a particular day-name and a particular number designate the quality of that day.
This 260-day calendar was common to many parts of Mesoamerica, called the *tonalamatl* by the Aztec, identified as the *tzolkin* by some Maya and Western scholars. Written evidence for the use of this calendar goes back to the sixth century B.C.E. While its origin is not known, it is suggested that the numbers 13 and 20 relate to the various segments of the lunar cycle. This calendar, imaged in signs in the lowlands and Peten, but as day-names in the highlands, remains the spiritual foundation for ceremonies, divination, and understanding personal capacities. Contemporary *Ajq’ijab’* utilize the *Cholq’ij* as an orientation instrument so that people can live in harmony with the universe.

Geological formations such as volcanoes, mountains, convergences of mountain ranges, springs of water, and particularly caves, are linked with ancestral traditions and possess spiritual qualities. Each geological formation and place has a distinct *Uk’ur*, heart, owner, *nawal* or guardian spirit, and possesses some determined energy, making communication with the sacred accessible; thus distinct places are portals to the sacred. Some sites are designated for curing and healing, others for economic well-being, or to resolve a problem. Maya speak of sacred places as *encantos*, places where one is more likely to encounter a spirit or where a specific, personalized, maybe anthropomorphic manifestation shows itself, and of *altars* (*kojb’al* = “a place where you go to give something”) where one offers prayers, but does not necessarily perform a ceremony. However, both *encantos* and *altars* are places of contact and communication with Ajau, and with the ancestors.

Central and most sacred to the *Ajq’ijab’* is the natural element of fire. The ceremonial arena, prepared of aromatic materials and designed to mirror the Maya quatrefoil microcosm in images, colors and spatial designs, becomes the ritual space, set apart in geography and time. Here, the aromatic materials are consumed in the flames; the fire becomes the conduit between heaven and Earth, between humans and the Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth. In the legacy of the first humans, the great wise ones, the great thinkers, penitents, and sacrificers in *Popul Vuh*, who unwrapped their copal incense, offer their copal and pom with great thanksgiving. In this ritual, positive and negative forces of the animating energy are brought into harmony.

Oh, Ajau,
Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth.
Hidden treasure, which fills the four corners of the universe
Only peace and tranquility surround you.
(Prayer of *Ajq’ijab’* of Zunil)

As transnational, national, and local companies or families privatize land and natural resources for profitable development, *Ajq’ijab’* find their access or right of entry to sacred places barred, at some sites their safety threatened. On a larger level, Maya agricultural workers confront serious questions as the processes of transnational agribusiness have established a dependency on imported chemical sprays, fertilizers, factory farms, and non-reproducible seeds, which yield marketable crops in a shorter period of time, but in the long run, deplete the Earth’s nutrients. Farmers find that after years of using chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the Earth no longer produces. The farming population is torn between immediate economic survival and a long-term sustainable relationship with the land. Some local Maya communities are developing agricultural projects that investigate and cultivate diverse species of edible, medicinal, and aromatic plants native to the region, which combine agricultural practices with forest habitations, utilize organic products, and develop and share seeds unique to the region for the purpose of developing a sustainable, ecological relationship with the land. At the same time, unexplored and untapped wealth, especially in terms of petroleum, minerals, and hydro-electric power, and subject to Ladino colonization and state-foreign economic activity, such as dams, roads, oil exploration and cattle production in the Franja Transversals del Norte and in the Peten, are being developed. These recent projects have displaced tens of thousands of Maya during the civil war (1978–1985); more recently Maya communities and ecological support groups have begun questioning and protesting these projects, such as the oil drilling in Lake Petén Itzá. Communities question the damage to the beauty and ecological balance of the land, the depletion of natural resources, and the displacement of indigenous communities. The ancestral philosophy of reciprocity and care of the Earth is foundational to Maya responses to this nascent and emerging resistance. Some local groups, often motivated by *Ajq’ijab’,* are beginning to cultivate medicinal gardens, clinical dispensaries of natural medicine, and small organic agricultural projects; however, to date, *Ajq’ijab’* who are not an organized, institutionalized body, have not responded to these concerns systematically nor publicly. Local Maya communities are beginning to understand and confront the consequences of transnational, global agricultural projects, and the consequent depletion of their natural resources and the economic and biological loss to their communities.

*Jean Molesky-Poz*

**Further Reading**
Mayan Catholicism

Christianity came to the Mayas during the early sixteenth century, as the “spiritual conquest” comprised a central element of the Spanish subjugation of present-day Mexico and Guatemala. In Yucatan, Chiapas, and Guatemala, friars from the Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian, and the Jesuit orders endeavored to convert indigenous souls and to extirpate pre-Christian Mayan religion with some, but by no means complete, success. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Roman Catholic Church had established a firm institutional presence in southern Mexico and Guatemala. Nevertheless, pre-hispanic religion proved resilient, as Mayan people grafted Christian beliefs onto their traditional worldview. In many parts of Mesoamerica (southern Mexico, Yucatan, and highland Guatemala) today, Mayan spirituality still coexists alongside Catholic religion.

Folk Catholicism

In modern times, most Mayans consider themselves to be Christian, even though they may simultaneously subscribe to a Mayan, as opposed to Western, view of the temporal world and the cosmos. This simultaneous adherence to what might appear to be otherwise contradictory belief systems is possible in part because many Maya consider their spirituality to be not so much a “religion” per se, based on dogma, as a “way of being” that is integrated into and helps determine the conduct of everyday life. As such, Mayan spirituality is generally focused around three central elements: peace with the natural world that sustains life, peace with other people (including the dead), which is negotiated within the sacred space of the ancient Mayan calendar cycle, and peace with the deity/ies (saints).

The relationship with nature in Mayan Catholicism is especially strong, as the Maya believe that the essence of divinity is present in significant land forms, plants and animals. Corn is a sacred element to the Maya, not only as the primary source of food, but also as the literal source of life itself, as described in the creation myth of the Ki’che’ Maya holy book, the Popol Vuh. As Catholics, the Maya share a belief in a monotheistic creator God, but they also pray to many saints/gods. These divine beings are considered to be present in spatial geography, especially in mountains, which provide a sacred landscape visible in nearly every corner of Guatemala. Sacred landforms include not only mountains, but also caves, cenotes, and other notable but transient natural features such as earthquakes. These elements are believed to embody divine energy and power, and demand consideration, offerings, and propitiation.

Secondly, the environmental aspect of Mayan folk Catholicism is evident in the dual-gendered nature of God. In this hermeneutics, the motherness of God is in the form of the Earth (tierra), and the Earth is considered to be the feminine face of God. As such the Earth exhibits multiple facets of God’s divine maternity, as the source of life, and, like a mother, “protects, cures, punishes, and suffers for her children” (Ak’Kutan 1994: 58). Thus, the Earth is not only a material symbol of God’s benevolence and amplitude, but it is also considered sacred as a physical entity.

In the scholarly literature, the commingling of two or more religious systems has been defined as “religious syncretism,” or, more specifically to the Mayan context, “folk Catholicism” (Wallace 1956: 81) or, most recently, “religious creolization” (Seibers 1999: 272). All three of these terms refer to the fusion of Mayan spirituality with Catholic belief, ritual, and practice. This body of creolized religious practices is commonly referred to as “costumbre,” (custom). Costumbre, which incorporates not only religious belief in practice, but also day-to-day concerns such as language use, mode of dress, gender relations, relations with the natural environment, and locationality, has traditionally formed the nexus of Mayan social identity. Because the Catholic saints, ritual and liturgical cycle are integral to costumbre, there has long been a strong historical association between this type of Catholicism and Mayan ethnic identity.

Catholic Action

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church initiated a program known as Catholic Action to
bring centrifugal groups, such as workers, youth and others, back within the broad authority of the Church. In Guatemala, this resulted in the entry of missionary clergy to reintroduce orthodox Roman Catholic dogma and liturgy into Mayan parishes. A particular focus of Catholic Action was to try to uncouple Catholic practices from their long association with the Mayan sacred landscape. A second focus was to attempt to divest the practice of “everyday” Mayan spirituality – associated with divination, fertility, the planting and harvesting of corn, and interaction with the natural world (plants, animals, Earth, and cosmos) – of its Catholic symbolism. Finally, Catholic Action has also sought to diminish the importance that Mayan Catholics places on the traditional Mayan calendar cycle, by redirecting liturgical performance toward the Western Catholic liturgical calendar.

Virginia Garrard-Burnett

Further Reading
See also: Christianity (6a) – Roman Catholicism; Maya Religion (Central America); Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Mayan Protestantism; Mayan Spirituality and Conservation (Western Highlands, Guatemala); Mesoamerican Deities.

Mayan Protestantism

Protestantism came to the Mayan areas of Guatemala and Mexico in the late nineteenth century in the form of missionaries from mainline Protestant denominations from the United States. In addition to their evangelizing project, these early missionaries enjoyed close ties to the Guatemalan and Mexican governments, which saw missionaries as “civilizing agents” who would advance Liberal social interests such as education. Although Protestant missionaries did create a significant social presence in Mayan communities, where they established schools, health clinics, literacy training, and the first modern orthographies for the transcription of Mayan languages, their religious influence in the communities was practically nil for at least the first half of the twentieth century.

This situation changed dramatically, however, in the second half of the twentieth century. Changes within the Roman Catholic Church, particularly the introduction of Catholic Action, which sought to eliminate “folk” and traditionalist Mayan religious practices from Catholicism in Guatemala and southern Mexico, and economic changes, began to challenge the spiritual hegemony of Catholicism. At the same time, in the late 1950s, new types of Protestant missionaries from the United States, offering what they called a “spiritual alternative to communism,” began actively to evangelize in Guatemala, although to a lesser extent in Mexico, where their efforts were stymied by strong anti-clerical legislation. It was, however, a natural disaster, the catastrophic earthquake of 1976, that propelled the growth of Protestantism in Guatemala, as people flocked to churches for spiritual solace and for the emergency relief that critics referred to as “amina por lámina,” or a “soul for plastic roofing.”

The post-earthquake period marked the beginning of large-scale conversion of Mayan people from Catholicism to Protestantism, and specifically to Pentecostalism, a highly experiential, ecstatic form of worship in which believers experience what they call the “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” Conversions to Protestantism continued to increase in the late 1970s and 1980s, particularly during the period known as la violencia (the violence), when the Guatemalan army’s war of counterinsurgency against the guerrillas destroyed hundreds of Mayan villages and their inhabitants, displacing tens of thousands of people from their geographic and familial homelands. In southern Mexico, Protestantism began to advance among the Maya of Chiapas in the 1980s, during a period of increasing political and economic pressure in the region. In Chiapas, tension between Mayan Protestants and Mayan traditionalists has resulted in interethnic violence and the expulsion of Protestants from their villages, a situation that has been exacerbated by the political and economic crises that provoked the emergence of the Zapatista armed movement in 1994. Some scholars have suggested that the physical displacement of Mayan people from their traditional sacred landscapes may have opened a social space for Protestantism, which is less dependent than “folk Catholicism” on sacred geography, such as specific mountains or the cycles of nature, for its symbolism and meaning.
Pentecostalism

Mayan Pentecostals eschew such “traditionalist” practices as the adoration of the saints/deities, the rituals associated with the sacred days of the Mayan calendar, and divination, all of which they condemn as both “pagan” and, simultaneously, as “Catholic.” Yet Mayan Protestants argue that the form and substance of Pentecostal worship does, in some regards, valorize critical aspects of Mayan culture. Because leadership in a congregation comes from personal revelation and public affirmation, the pastorate of such churches is largely Mayan and pastors tend to reflect the common experience, worldview, including the relations between humans and their environment, and language as the members of their congregations. The liturgical practices of Pentecostalism – the testimonies, demonstrations of “gifts of the Spirit” (speaking in tongues, faith healing, prophecy) – may bear more of a structural linkage to the other-worldly practices of Mayan shamanism (healing, speaking to and by inanimate objects, divination) than they do to either traditional Catholicism or mainline (non-Pentecostal) Protestantism. Since the 1980s, a Catholic analog to Pentecostalism, known as Renovación católica, or “Catholic Renewal” has also been a dynamic force in Mayan areas, suggesting that the appeal of pneumatic religion transcends denominational considerations.

Because Mayan Protestants eschew the ritual and material elements of worship such as the use of pine resin incense, astrology, and pilgrimages to mountain shrines that are found in folk Catholicism, there is not as strong a tie to the natural world in Mayan Protestantism or Pentecostalism as there is in Mayan Catholicism. Nevertheless, because many Mayan Protestants are campesinos (rural peasants), they are still closely tied to their environment and to the cycles of nature, particularly as they relate to planting and harvest, even to the extent of offering special prayers and offerings at critical times during the agricultural cycle. While Mayan Protestants officially subscribe to the biblical teaching that God gave humankind dominion over the Earth (Genesis 1:28), Mayan Protestants are likely to interpret this “dominion” as a benign guardianship.

Further Reading


See also: Maya Religion (Central America); Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Mayan Catholicism; Mayan Spirituality and Conservation (Western Highlands, Guatemala); Mesoamerican Deities.

Mayan Spirituality and Conservation (Western Highlands, Guatemala)

Indigenous peoples comprise two-thirds of the 11 million inhabitants of Guatemala, most of them of Maya origin. Evidence has demonstrated the presence of human population in the territory occupied today by Guatemala since 11,000 B.C.C., according to Michael Coe. With time and the domestication of several important crops, like maize, beans and squashes, the Maya evolved into one of the most developed civilizations of the ancient world, building large cities and sophisticated waterworks, and inventing a hieroglyphic writing system, and a very precise calendar based in deep astronomical knowledge.

The Maya, as other indigenous peoples, have a belief system deeply rooted in nature, which they consider sacred. For the Maya the relationship with the cosmos and the community is framed in terms of reciprocity, which means that people should always be grateful and respectful for what they receive. Although poverty, discrimination, technology and cultural change have all modified the relationship of the Maya with nature, they still have a basic ethic and attitude different from mestizo peoples, who have received more Western influence.

After three decades of civil war and military repression that mainly affected Mayan peoples, Guatemalan society is slowly looking for better ways to relate among its constituents. The Peace Agreements signed in 1996 opened a new era for the country, and the Mayan organizations were able to articulate a specific agreement that deals with their identity and rights, including their right to practice their spirituality. On the other hand, Mayan spirituality is experiencing an unprecedented revival, especially among young intellectuals and professionals who look for ways to differentiate themselves from mainstream society and reaffirm their Mayan identity.

The Significance of Sacred Sites

Rituals are the visible cornerstone of Mayan spirituality. They are the visible component of the reciprocal relationship that Mayas try to maintain with nature. The rationale behind this is that if nature is providing them with good soil, water, wood, medicinal plants, and animals to hunt, they should be grateful for this generosity. In a different sense, several Mayan groups consider that the “owners” of natural resources are local guardians. Consequently, everybody should always ask permission from local guardians in order to slash the forest for agriculture, cut a tree for construction or firewood, or hunt an animal for subsistence.
Rituals are performed in natural settings, mainly on the summit of high mountains, close to cave entrances, and on a few occasions, at the border of lagoons and rivers. Ancient Maya cities and Catholic churches built on top of ancient temples are also important sacred sites. Their location is usually indicative of an in-depth sensibility to natural beauty and the search for quietness and intimacy with Ajaw, the Lord, and with nature. The cultural landscape of Guatemala has plenty of sacred sites, several of them located in groups of four around the main historical towns, and representing the four corners of the universe.

Actual Status of Sacred Sites
After the arrival of the Spaniards, several Maya sacred sites were “christianized” by building churches, or at least a cross, on top of them. Actual ownership of sacred sites depends on the history of each particular region of the country. In the western highlands, most sacred sites are located in communal or municipal lands, while in the Pacific Coast and the Verapaces, several sacred sites are nowadays privately owned. In several cases, private ownership has created problems of access to some sacred sites, especially when the owner has become an evangelical Christian. Often sacred sites are located in areas important for biodiversity conservation, which opens opportunities for the building of alliances with conservationists.

Several sacred sites have fallen into decay, due to increased deforestation in the surrounding landscapes, forest fires and non-biodegradable garbage. In the Maya-Popti’ territory of western Huehuetenango some exceptions to this rule are found. There, local Maya spiritual guides, together with the municipality and the Academy of Mayan Languages, have organized to take care of them. They clean and fence the sacred sites, ask for respect from visitors, and build structures where pilgrims can take shelter from sun and rain while praying. The Ministry of Culture is taking care of Ancient Maya cities such as Zaculeu, Iximche’, and Chiantla Viejo, although sometimes specific sacred sites within an archeological park are polluted with garbage, as is the case in Iximche’. On the other hand, other important ancient Maya cities are totally abandoned, with no management responsibility from the central government, municipalities or local spiritual guides.

The Commission of Sacred Sites
A Commission of Sacred Sites, formed with spiritual guides and government representatives, was created as a result of the Peace Agreements signed between the Guatemalan Government and the leftist insurgency after 36 years of civil war ended in 1996. After several months of deliberations the commission was dismantled, however, without reaching agreement. The main source of controversy was the non-negotiable position of the indigenous representatives that only an indigenous organization of spiritual leaders has the right to manage ancient Maya cities. These indigenous organizations believe mestizo organizations, including the government, should only manage colonial monuments.

Despite the long history of government harassment, Mayan people at a number of ancient Maya cities have conducted rituals without interruption throughout colonial, republican and modern times. Ritualizing at other sites, such as Tikal, Dos Pilas, Naj Tunich, and Cancuén in Petén, has restarted recently. Permanent altars for Maya religious ceremonies have been built in the ancient Maya cities of Takalik Abaj and Tikal, much to the dismay of most archeologists. Some archeologists believe that building permanent structures for altars distorts the original meaning of the site and deleteriously impact on the original layout, and that some have been located in places where previously there was no ceremonial use.

The Chicabal Volcano and Lagoon
The case of Chicabal volcano, however, shows that a dialogue between Maya spiritual guides and protected area managers is possible, at least at the local level, and that it can lead to the protection of sacred sites.

Chicabal, which means “good or sweet place” in the Maya-Mam language, is a volcano with a lagoon in its crater. It is located at the municipality of San Martín Sacatepéquez, department of Quetzaltenango in western Guatemala. Chicabal is occupied by the Maya-Mam, one of the four largest indigenous groups in the country. The area is located within the cloud forests of the southern slope of the volcanic chain of western Guatemala, an important region for conservation due to its endemism, water production, tourism potential, and role as winter refuge and stopover for migratory birds.

Chicabal is the most important sacred site for the Maya-Mam, especially for those in western Quetzaltenango. Spiritual guides report that there were more than 80 altars in the past, although by the early twenty-first century, only 26 altars appear to be used, and most of these are situated around the lagoon or near the summit of the crater, called Poblil. The altars are visited all year round, following the sacred Maya calendar, which provides for appropriate dates according with the intended praying. However, what makes Chicabal outstanding is the annual “praying for the rains” ceremonies, drawing more than 6000 visitors from the surrounding region and beyond. This special day coincides with the Catholic celebration of Jesus’ Ascension to heaven. Besides people following Mayan spirituality, Catholic priests and pilgrims from the region climb to Chicabal the day before the Maya celebration in order to hear Mass at the border of the lagoon. This is part of a widespread movement within the Catholic Church that calls for the “inculturation” of the Christian message into the indigenous cultures. Although
evangelicals generally consider Maya spirituality to be diabolic, they also visit the lagoon to fast and pray, a legacy that can, perhaps, be considered to be the result of cultural inertia. As a sign of respect, Maya spiritual guides give Chicabal the treatment of Q’tru, which means mother or lady. Other important days for Mayan rituals at Chicabal are the Day of the Cross (3 May) and the Waraqib’ B’atz, the first day of the sacred Maya calendar.

Management as Protected Area
In 1956 the entire Chicabal area was declared, together with all the volcanoes in Guatemala, to be a “no-hunting zone,” but the law had little impact in the field. Chicabal was also included in the list of archeological monuments in June 1972. In spite of its legal status, Chicabal has been managed as a protected area by ASAECO (Asociación de Agricultores Ecológicos), a local organization formed by the actual landowners of most of the lagoon and the crater. All of them are Maya-Mam farmers from the nearby community of Toj Mech who bought the area in 1986 from a non-indigenous woman who had bought it from the first non-indigenous owner.

The farmers now associated in ASAECO bought the area to increase their farmland, mainly for potato and maize crops. They slashed the forest in several areas for agriculture and built a road to the lagoon in order to transport their agricultural produce. However, the terrain proved to be very steep, sandy and prone to erosion. Recognising the difficulties in farming the area, the municipality of San Martín Sacatepéquez and Helvetas, a Swiss NGO, approached the landowners in 1996. They offered them technical and financial assistance if they would declare and manage their terrain as a protected area, indicating they would help them to develop its tourism potential. The technical studies required to create a protected area have been presented to the national Congress and a completed management plan will likely be established by 2004.

The Sacred Dimension is Taken into Account
When active management and protection of the area started in 1999, spiritual guides were afraid that their traditional rituals would be prohibited. Gradually they realized that ASAECO, Helvetas and the municipality wanted to prevent the environmental degradation of the area, and promote and regulate public use of the area. María Victoria García, the former director of the municipal department of protected areas; started a process of dialogue with spiritual guides from the surrounding areas. As a starting point, several Mayan ceremonies were performed in Chicabal and other sacred sites, in essence, seeking harmony and the conservation of nature in the protected areas. As confidence grew, spiritual guides were asked for suggestions for the management of Chicabal. They requested that visitors should not be allowed to bathe, swim and fish in the lagoon, in order to respect its sacredness, and this desire was incorporated into the current area management plan, further building trust between the spiritual guides and the management authorities of the protected area.

Several additional actions have further built respect for and promoted the site’s sacred status. First, the area is being characterized in the welcoming signs as “Center of the Maya-Mam worldview,” while other signs at the entrance ask the visitor to respect the Maya altars. Furthermore, a complete interpretation of the Maya calendar was posted in the most visited area of the lagoon. Park guards and guides from ASAECO ask visitors to respect the area as a sacred site, not to leave any garbage and to avoid making a noise when Mayan ceremonies are being performed.

As a result, spiritual guides are satisfied that Mayan altars and nature are being protected. They feel, however, that the many members of ASAECO, being evangelical Christians, do not fully respect Maya spirituality and the Chicabal lagoon as a sacred site. These guides would like to have more formal participation in the protected area management and even greater consideration of its sacredness.

The Chicabal case suggests that protected areas, managed by local authorities, are more likely to incorporate respect for indigenous religious practices performed by their own people. However, some distrust remains when authorities follow a different religion and do not participate in Mayan ceremonies. Nonetheless, it is clear that a fruitful dialogue with indigenous spiritual guides is possible as part of the management of protected areas. As this is one of the very few examples where Mayas themselves are managing a protected area, a great deal can be learned from its evolution and development.

Further Reading
See also: Indigenous Activism and Environmentalism in Latin America; Maya Religion (Central America); Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Mesoamerican Deities; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Volcanoes.

McDonagh, Sean (1944–)
Sean McDonagh, a renowned ecological theologian, was born in Nenagh, Ireland, studied for the priesthood in Navan (ordained 1969), and was sent as a Columban missionary father to Mindanao Island, the Philippines, the same year. After working among the lowland people in Oroqueta City, Misamis Occidental, Mindanao for four years, he studied linguistic anthropology in the USA. On
returning from Washington, D.C., he taught at the Mindanao State University in a predominantly Muslim area, and then moved to Lake Sebu to work among the mountain people called the T'boli.

In response to the destruction of local forest in T'boli country, McDonagh began his ecological activism, which culminated in the pioneering book *To Care for the Earth* (1985), though it took three years to find a publisher because the connection between ecology and theology was not well known. *To Care for the Earth* called for a new theology which would give at least as much prominence to creation as to redemption. McDonagh argued that the grammar of this new creation theology ought to be the findings of modern science. McDonagh believed this new cosmology, developed from the insights of Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry, ought to become the guiding myth for modern humankind, especially in the way we relate to the Earth and other creatures.

In 1990 this volume was followed by *The Greening of the Church*, which revealed that, while Catholic teaching was strong on social issues, it needed to promulgate a supplementary message about the destruction of God's creation. The focus this time was on developing a theology of creation from the resources of the biblical tradition to complement the cosmological approach. The book also dealt with the thorny (at least from a Catholic perspective) issue of population. The chapter "Are There Too Many Mouths to Feed?" revisited the population question but from an ecological rather than philosophical-theological perspective. McDonagh argued that notion of "carrying capacity" puts limits on the human population levels on the planet. He pointed out that the notion of carrying capacity was not addressed by Pope Paul IV in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. The book was well received in environmental circles but strongly criticized by prominent bishops in both Ireland and the Philippines.

McDonagh's second book, moreover, contained the first environmental pastoral letter of any Catholic Conference of Bishops. Entitled *What is Happening to our Beautiful Land?,* the book had a major impact on the Philippine Church. Social justice programs are no longer confined to addressing human rights abuses or working for a more equitable society. They now include concern for the environment. In the Philippines this means protecting what is left of the tropical forests, mangroves and coral reefs. The pastoral letter was also printed and distributed by the Philippine Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). McDonagh was the main drafter of this document, which was published in 1988.

*Passion for the Earth* (1995) contains a critique of multilateral lending and trading bodies (World Bank, IMF, GATT–WTO) and their effects on development and the environment. Third World debt was his particular focus. In 1999 *Greening the Christian Millennium* appeared. It reflects on the ethical and ecological implications of genetic engineering in the plant world and on the patenting of life. McDonagh argued that a human-centered ethical framework, which has dominated Western thought for almost 2000 years, was unsuitable for discussing issues like genetic engineering. While supporting laboratory research in genetic engineering, he maintained that current field trials and the commercial planting of genetically engineered crops breached the precautionary principle and posed a danger to human health and the environment. Furthermore, he opposed patenting living organisms such as seeds or animals, viewing this as a new form of colonialism whereby the North, which is financially rich but poor in biodiversity, is able to commande the rich species and genetic resources of the South.

His most recent book *Why Are We Deaf to the Cry of the Earth?* looks at environmental challenges facing Ireland today after six years of unprecedented economic growth.

Garry W. Trompf

**Further Reading**


See also: Ireland; The Philippines.

**McFague, Sallie (1933–)**

"The world is our meeting place with God . . . as the body of God, it is wondrously, awesomely, divinely mysterious" (McFague 1993: vii). Sallie McFague ends her book *Models of God* and begins her book *The Body of God* with these words. For several decades McFague probed the language, specifically the metaphorical models used for God, in Christian doctrine and offered alternative models for what she calls an "ecological, nuclear age." Her basic premise is that the patriarchal, transcendent models that have dominated Christian theology, liturgy, and devotional life for generations contribute to the destructive, dominating relationship that, primarily, Christian cultures have assumed toward nature. McFague's alternative models include God as mother, lover, and friend and the world or universe as God's body.

McFague's first two books, *Speaking in Parables* and *Metaphorical Theology,* focused on the intersection of literature and theology. She takes seriously the impact of theological language on belief systems and practices, then questions the ontological claims made by such theological
language (metaphors/models). The connections between patriarchal, transcendent metaphorical language and environmental theology emerge in her book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. In this book, which received the American Academy of Religion’s Award for Excellence, she claims that the destruction of Earth, our only home, is tantamount to the most grievous of sins. It is this direction that she follows in *The Body of God*. Here McFague claims that Christianity, while often equated with a world-negating and body-hating belief system, is actually “the religion of the incarnation par excellence” (1993: 14). With that claim in mind, she questions the “abhorrence and loathing” of at least some “bodies” by Christianity. McFague then suggests that Christianity consider the “use of the model of body as a way of interpreting everything that is.” In a world that constructs reality differently, “one that took the ecological context as the primary one,” McFague suggests that “the body would be an appropriate model of God” (1993: 21). This is the challenge she offers to Christian theology.

Her final two books, *Life Abundant* and *Super, Natural Christians* are intended for audiences outside of academia, and for Christian lay audiences in particular. She proposes that “Christian nature spirituality should be based on a subject–subjects model of being, knowing, and doing in place of the subject–object model of Western culture” (1997: 2).

Sallie McFague received her B.A. from Smith College, her B.D., M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale University. Her degrees are in literature and theology. She taught at Vanderbilt University’s Divinity School for over thirty years, holding the positions of Carpenter Professor of Theology and serving as Dean of the Divinity School. She is Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology.

*Laura Hobgood-Oster*

**Further Reading**


See also: Christianity (7d) – Feminist Theology; Ecofeminism; Manifesto for North American Christians.

**McKenna, Terence (1946–2000)**

Terence McKenna was perhaps the most prominent spokesperson of the post-rave neo-psychedelic movement. McKenna’s writing challenges the reader to investigate ecstatic states empirically in order to judge whether his often very broad “repertoire of operational constructs” is “... in Wittgenstein’s wonderful phrase, ‘True enough’” (McKenna and McKenna 1994: xxv). Indeed, many of McKenna’s ideas are contentious: for instance, the notion of an Edenic “Ur culture” in humanity’s past; the simplistic typology of “partnership” versus “dominator” societies; and the theory that ingestion by early hominids of psilocybin mushrooms (provided by extraterrestrials) catalyzed human evolution. However, these polemical concerns are less pertinent to the reception of McKenna’s writings than they would be for studies that fall more conventionally within the sciences and humanities. Like the nineteenth-century Romantics, Terence McKenna’s writing conveys a revelation of a primary, poetic, revolutionary consciousness where, for those drawn to them, fantasy, hallucination, and dream are varieties of data that are as real as any other.

In 1975 Terence and his brother Dennis McKenna – an ethnobotanist and psychopharmacologist – published the recondite *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens and the I Ching*, recounting the hyperdimensional adventures and eschatological ideas resulting from an expedition to the Amazon in 1971. The goal of this expedition was to learn from *ayahuasqueros* – shamans who use the entheogenic potion *ayahuasca* to obtain ecstatic trance. The model of nature presented in *Invisible Landscape* is that of a complex mystery emanating as an organized fractal sequence from a unified, sentient, and abstract field: a model resonant with the newly simulated “virtual realities” of early 1990s cyberculture.

That symbioses between psychedelic plants and people can lead to deeper cultural and ecological awareness is a central theme of Terence McKenna’s work. McKenna advocated naturally occurring psychoactive substances, especially psilocin-containing mushrooms, DMT, and the tryptamine-containing entheogens of the Amazon, as ways of transcending the constraints of “dominator culture” and obtaining a vision of a more integrative, archaic and geocentric sociality. These themes are extensively developed in *The Archaic Revival* (1991) and *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge* (1992).

The visible manifesting of language is another recurrent theme in Terence McKenna’s writing. Appropriately, his (counter)cultural significance extended beyond his writings and charismatic spoken-word performances to multimedia collaborations, ethnobotanical conservation, and fundraising for environmental groups. He was a co-founder of Botanical Dimensions – an organization for the
conservation of plants that have traditional ritual and medicinal uses. His work and memory provide an enduring social-cohesive force within the neo-psychedelic community.

Des Tramacchi

Further Reading


See also: Ayahuasca; Entheogens; Ethnobotany; Leary, Timothy; New Age; Peyote; Psychonauts; UFOs and Extraterrestrials.

Media

“Mediated Spectacular Nature” is a catch-all phrase for a wide assortment of nature-themed media presentations. In the past, the term “spectacular” has been used to characterize venues in which natural phenomena have been separated from their place on the Earth and presented as freestanding spectacles, often for entertainment and/or economic gain. Critics have found fault with this practice, warning that failure to account for the interconnectivity of all things will eventually lead to environmental ruin. However, mediated spectacular nature – magazines, films, and television programs – have done more than simply inform and entertain. The media genre may also be playing a prominent role in the central meaning systems of those who use its presentations.

The findings that led to these conclusions emerged from the Symbolism, Media, and the Lifecourse Project at the University of Colorado-Boulder’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication. The multi-year audience-research project employed qualitative interview techniques better to understand how people meaningfully exist in the world, and specifically, how media play a role in the process of meaning-making. In almost all cases, the profound and mundane acts of daily life now involve interaction with the symbols and meanings of the media sphere. Over time, with the decline of the influence of traditional religious institutions, mediated meanings and the realm of commodity culture can be thought of as a religious sphere.

There are indications that the texts of mediated spectacular nature, located at the nexus of media, religion, and culture, have religious significance for many of those who use them. For example, one mother, a 43-year-old Native American spiritualist, described the way National Geographic magazines and specials capture the essence of her connection to the Earth:

It provides, for me, physically, solitude and quietness and contemplation and smallness, or just a small piece of this Earth. And I think that National Geographic catches that in the land, which I can relate to. It’s that stillness. They’re beautiful.

These sorts of interpretations were not exclusive to those aligned with Earth-centered belief systems. A discussion of mediated spectacular nature brought a similar response from a woman who subscribed to a religiously conservative Christian belief system. The connection between her religiosity and mediated spectacular nature emerged as a result of her reports of favorite family activities. One involved family members gathering together to view rented wildlife films and watch nature programming on the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet (she especially liked the show Crocodile Hunter). The mother explained that even the violence has a place in the meaning of life:

... it’s terrible to watch that kind of thing, so when (her youngest daughter) cries I want to reassure her that ... I don’t know why it has to be so violent, but it has to be because of “the circle of life” and all the balance and all this and that. And so I’m constantly pointing those things out, especially the religious aspect ... the God aspect when she’s crying about it or upset, and so I bring that into, “That’s the reason, honey, because God needed this to happen, we have to have the balance.”

Clearly, not all of the families interviewed presented such rich evidence. Other parents considered mediated spectacular nature to be merely a safe location for entertaining and informing their families. But enough of the
families shared the convictions of the women quoted above to warrant further understanding of a media genre with deep historical roots in the Western world and recent explosive growth.

A starting point for mediated spectacular nature has been traced back to the late nineteenth century with the developments of field biology and the movie camera. Edward Muybridge was the first to study animal locomotion with a series of cameras, and later filmed a tiger attacking a tethered buffalo at the Philadelphia Zoo. Public popularity of Muybridge's pioneering work, and the work of others, prompted a steady growth of wildlife film production at the turn of the century with public exhibitions becoming commonplace. Soon, images of animals (often purchased from the growing libraries of the wildlife film-makers) also found their way into travelogues and Hollywood adventure movies. The development was not restricted to motion pictures. The rise of mass journalism and technologies enabling photoengraving, along with the increasing public interest in science and the growing desire in the Western world to better understand itself by considering the "other" (human, animal, and land) fueled the slow but steady growth of *National Geographic* magazine. Over the twentieth century, the success of *National Geographic* spawned a variety of similar publications.

A pair of identifiable styles of mediated spectacular nature developed. The first, the "British model," put more emphasis on scientific research and less on narrative entertainment. It tended to have more descriptive close-ups than action-packed wide shots. The American tradition has followed the lines of what would later be known as the "classic" wildlife film: emphasizing drama, action, a strong story, and in more recent times, anthropomorphized animal characters. To capture dramatic action, practitioners of the American model have found it necessary to film in controlled settings, such as enclosures, and even zoos. Dramatic events are often set up, provoked, or pieced together in the editing room, sometimes using unrelated film and sequences.

Quintessential examples of each form have existed. Walt Disney's wildly popular and heavily distributed *True Life Adventure* movies produced through the 1950s and 1960s embodied the American model. Meanwhile, David Attenborough's work with the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) wildlife film-making projects has always been carefully attentive to the spirit of the British model. But most examples of mediated depictions of the natural world have presented a blending of the two. In *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, the Natural Geographic Society's specials and magazines, Jacques Cousteau's underwater adventures, and countless other wildlife films and TV productions, one can detect the influence of both approaches.

Another important development that contributing to the importance of the meaningful potential of this genre, has been its meteoric expansion. After having watched the success of cable channels such as Home Box Office and ESPN, John S. Hendricks launched the Discovery Channel with a niche format that attracted viewers interested in programming about the natural world. By investing in its own original programming, funding expeditions around the world, and recouping hefty costs by dubbing the narrations for a global audience, the channel has grown to be one of the most popular in the world. Discovery Communications has spun-off the popular Animal Planet channel, while the United States Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), a haven for wildlife film-makers and home to the successful *Nature* series, has seen a boost in ratings in recent years. The American television network ABC has presented nature programming in an agreement with ABC World of Discovery executive producer Dennis B. Kane, and competitor NBC's return of *National Geographic* specials to prime-time commercial TV in the mid-1990s all enjoyed solid ratings. In January of 2001, National Geographic Television went after lucrative market share when it launched its own National Geographic Channel. Combined with a growing array of nature shows aimed at children on the network and cable channels, mediated spectacular nature has become a pervasive presence in American media.

The examples of meaningful relationships of audience members with mediated spectacular nature, combined with an ever-more pervasive presence in the media market, indicate that the use of mediated spectacular nature may have reached the status of popular religious practice. Charles Lippy presented a number of characteristics of meaningful practice that would designate it popular religiosity, including: a private character; a lack of organization; a tendency to syncretically blend world-views, drawing from well-established, central-social beliefs, as well as newer, at times even ephemeral, ideas; a sense of sanctuary from chaotic existence; and access to the power of the supernatural, or what lies beyond the here-and-now. While activities such as body building, or spending time at Starbucks may constitute similar, meaningful popular religious activity for individuals in a relatively small group, the number of people experiencing mediated spectacular nature and the rich potential for the possibilities of that experience indicate that a substantial collectivity, indeed what we may one day be able to demonstrate as *global* in scope, may be using mediated spectacular nature as an inventory of contemporary symbols and values. Indeed, we could say it is a religion of nature.

If people are utilizing such presentations as *National Geographic* magazine and *Animal Planet's Crocodile Hunter* for their symbols and meanings, why is this happening now? One might point to the technological and market forces that prompted the explosive growth of...
mediated spectacular nature (i.e., it is what is there, so people will eventually find it meaningful). That is undoubtedly part of it, but there is also something else. Humans need vivid stories that they can tell themselves to make sense of the contradictions of existence. As we have become more aware of the degradation resulting from our burdensome resource usage, we have filled out these stories with the symbols and meanings of the natural world. Mass communication serves as a prominent vehicle in the telling and retelling of these stories. Mediated spectacular nature has come to stand at the intersection of media, religion, and nature – a representative example of a contemporary, nature-related, religious cultural production.

Joseph G. Champ
Stewart M. Hoover

**Further Reading**


See also: Disney; Disney Worlds at War; Mother Nature Imagery; Motion Pictures; Social Construction of Nature and Environmental Ethics.

**Melanesia – Eco-Missiological Issues**

The impact of Christianity on Melanesia has been immense, over 90 percent of its population identifying with one denomination or another. Marshaling the moral powers of this universal tradition for environmental care has become an urgent imperative to curb irresponsible actions toward forests, waterways and oceans. With the continuing effects of international business enterprises, the onset of new national or regional governments, and pressures from the foreign policies of stronger powers, tropical environments have been made vulnerable, and high standards of environmental safeguarding are needed. Christian appeals to care for God’s creation take on a crucial significance when the churches play such a potentially potent role to instill common values and insist on national protection against outsiders. Unfortunately, however, foreigners’ purchasing power – a taste of the “Cargo” – can too easily tempt local communities to part with precious resources, while levels of corruptibility among the new elites (especially in complex Papua New Guinea) have made for many underhand exploitations of forestland. Exposure of the issues by defenders of the environment (in parliaments, the press, churches, etc.) are too often made after disasters have occurred.

The up-and-coming elite, however, have received exposure to ecological issues through the writings of environmental philosophers and eco-theologians, and this is generating a climate of wiser decision making. The most famous of these thinkers in the region are Bernard Narokobi, who has been Minister for Justice and Speaker of the House of Parliament, Papua New Guinea, and the late Jean-Marie Tjibaou, who was the leading radical opponent to French colonialism in New Caledonia, and head of the *Front de libération nationale kanake et socialiste* (FLNKS).

Narokobi has questioned whether Western concepts of private property rights and crown land concepts should be imposed on traditional peoples, and, combining traditional and Christian insights, he has also called for a radical re-visioning of Oceania’s environmental future – to forestall damage coming through foreign exploitation. His influence has been greater on post-Independence Ni-Vanuatu policies than in his native Papua New Guinea.

Narokobi’s fellow Catholic, former priest Tjibaou, has worked against alienation of tribal lands by colonial settlers and massive scarring of mountain faces through nickel mining. He knew that political self-determination for the islanders (kanaks) was fundamental for obtaining environmental security.

Tjibaou was aware of the dangers of hand-out development from the French Government and bitterly opposed France’s nuclear explosion trials in the eastern Pacific. Apropos hand-out development, his position has been expanded upon by Protestant churchman Pothin Wete, who teaches that state financial concessions to the kanaks has come at the expense of the indigenous people’s souls, along with the constant temptation to sell land for ready-at-hand cash. As for the nuclear question, this has also been taken up by a Protestant woman theologian, Suliana Siwatibau of Fiji, who cooperated with expatriate David Williams to produce the best popular handbook about the dangers of nuclear testing. Siwatibau used the biblical prophetic tradition as the basis for her ethical stance and for urging the preservation of creation. (The handbook was re-published by Greenpeace, yet without the insightful references to biblical prophetism).
Other indigenous eco-theologians of note are Choiseul Islanders Rev. Leslie Boseto (former Moderator of the United Church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands), who has sponsored the World Council of Churches’ values for the “Integrity of Creation,” and Esau Tuza, who perceived the significance of the independent Christian Fellowship Church (CFC) on New Georgia as a model of defense against environmental piracy. This church is one among a variety of independent groups, started by indigenous leaders that have split off from the mission churches during Melanesia’s history. The CFC, led by a prophet called the “Holy Mama,” successfully prevented Lever Brothers’ irresponsible rainforest logging in the 1980s. Job Dudley, the son of this prophet, kept up the same pro-conservationist stance as a minister in the Solomonese government (although independent Korean loggers later subverted the local people with bribes).

In Papua New Guinea, the Tolai priest ToVagira (from New Britain) has produced an important resource book on land and mineral rights in his nation. Meanwhile, Tolai public servant and United Church layman Paulias Matane spearheaded work to create the Melanesian Environment Foundation in 1984, a national Melanesian Council of Churches project trying to integrate traditional and Christian values in a unified environmental policy for Papua New Guinea.

Generally speaking, interdenominational church voices had become somewhat muted by 2000, but Christian appeals to the integrity of creation are likely to become more effective as Melanesia’s environmental vulnerability becomes more obvious. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of New Guinea, for instance, declared an active policy of land restoration in 2001 in order that – after a history of church-run plantations – the land be restored to its original inhabitants, along with their choice of its utilization. Another example is found in Aitape (a western Sepik district), where the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission for the Diocese has published popular materials to deter people from spoiling their lands and selling off rainforest to logging interests.

Various other voices and eco-theological impetuses could be noted. Expatriate influences are involved. The longest-standing residential protagonist for environmentalism and a nuclear-free Pacific in Papua New Guinea is Elizabeth Johnson, a poetess influenced by Quakerism and creation spirituality. Agricultural advisers with church connections have also long been monitoring soil erosion on sugar cane plantations owned by Fijians. All these voices have affected government and local action to place restraints on environmental exploitation in Melanesia, which, because of huge forest areas in inaccessible valleys, still remains one of the least environmentally damaged regions on Earth.

Garry W. Trompf

Further Reading
See also: Melanesian Traditions; Surfing.

Melanesia – New Religious Movements

In the Melanesian region different kinds of new religious movements have emerged during the colonial and post-colonial periods. These include “cargo cults,” neo-traditionalist movements, and independent churches. Of these; cargo cults are by far the best-known response to social change: their leaders and adjutants seek to persuade villagers that the strange new (Western-style) goods, which they have difficulty acquiring, will soon arrive in remarkable quantities. These goods were seen as coming from the hands of their returning ancestors, or of Jesus in his second advent, or by some other spiritually significant means. These apparently bizarre expectations often arise because, when not knowing the source of internationally marketed commodity items, villagers apply ritual techniques to acquire them, just as they invoked the spirits to make their gardens produce and their livestock increase. Prima facie, these responses to rapid social change look “environmentally unfriendly,” translating the Melanesians’ well-known “materialist” attentions from their own organic products to consumer items. In various outbursts of collective conviction that a great day of blessing (some scholars say “millennium”) is coming, gardens have been deliberately ruined and pigs killed in great numbers.

Thus traditional life-ways or modes of production have been abandoned while people waited for ships and planes to bring new riches from the great beyond. Makeshift airstrips and wharves have sometimes been built to receive the goods, dreams of miraculous transformations being especially fueled by the presence of the American forces, with their startling equipment and intense activity in the Pacific during World War II. Many Mengan people, for instance, who have joined a movement in East New Britain called the Pomio Kivung movement, currently share such high cargoist hopes. They believe that the returning ancestors will have the power to create, by a mere wish, a city the size of New York on Jacquinot Bay.
On the other hand, various cargo cults are protests against unequal access to “the Cargo” in favor of the white people or of foreigners generally, and in the course of time they can inspire effective opposition against colonial intrusion, including land alienation and desecration. Bougainville, an island to the far north-east of Papua New Guinea, provides an important example. There the mining of Mt. Panguna by an Australian company resulted in a cluster of cargo-cultist responses, one of them backing the local war to keep the mine closed down by upholding an ideology that the whole island is sacred (mekamui) and its environment requiring protection. It is a fallacy, however, to overlook other kinds of Melanesian religious responses that cannot easily be dubbed cargoist. These include neo-traditionalist movements and independent (or indigenously originated) churches.

Neo-traditionalist movements call for a rejection of outsider influences and a return to ancestral ways of life (even if these are almost always inevitably modified to preclude warriorhood activity). Some cargo cults have certainly taken on this aspect. Yali of Singina in the Madang area (New Guinea), for instance, organized a large movement that turned its back on “Mission and Administration” after World War II and performed innovative rituals to the ancestors to get the Cargo. Because the Cargo has not come in any grand miraculous fashion, though, the movement now tends to encourage old village ways rather than cash-cropping and business. Other collective neo-traditionalist responses are not cargoist. The leaders of the Moro movement on Guadalcanal (Solomon Islands), for example, simply teach – albeit with writing and use of blackboards in small schools – that the followers should avoid the introduced ways and keep up traditional practice, which will conserve the environment.

Melanesian independent churches, like their black counterparts in Africa, often synthesize indigenous with Christian outlooks. Led by local prophet-founders, such churches have been known to take up environmental causes. The NaGriamel movement, for example, founded by Jimmy Stevens on Espiritu Santo and also known as the NaGriamel Church of Christ, gained popularity and eventually pre-independence political clout for its opposition to massive (especially French settler-generated) land alienation in the New Hebrides (renamed Vanuatu). The movement’s subversive qualities were used as an excuse to clinch Vanuatu’s independence, with the British and French leaving their former colonial Condominium at exactly the same time, to allow the Papua New Guinea Defense Force (PNGDF) to land on Espiritu Santo, and to put down Stevens’ activities in the so-called “Coconut War” (1980). This legitimated the new indigenously led national government at Port Vila. Ironically, the leader of the PNGDF received a plantation on Espiritu Santo as a prize. Such vulnerability in environmental struggle is also illustrated by the Christian Fellowship Church of New Georgia (Solomons), which successfully opposed American logging interests in the 1980s only to find the villagers succumbing to persistent Korean pressures a decade later.

Overall, each new Melanesian movement requires examination to see the extent to which any “nativistic pull” produces an impetus toward environmental security or pushes toward embracing modernity.

Garry W. Trompf

Further Reading
See also: Bougainville (Papua New Guinea); Melanesian Traditions; Papua New Guinea.

Melanesian Traditions

Melanesia, stretching from the Bird’s Head in the west of the great New Guinea island across to Fiji, and including West Papua (Irian Jaya), Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, and Vanuatu, carries more discrete religions than any other region on Earth. With very general configurations discussed under “Pacific Islands, Religion and Nature,” here we make sense of the great complexity of over 1500 small-scale and “stone age” cultures with some guarded generalities. Lexical equivalents for religion and nature are generally lacking in traditional vocabularies, but words for worship and world are found virtually everywhere, although “world” almost always denotes some small geographical encompassment, with Melanesians tending to conceive their cosmoses horizontally rather than vertically.

Thus creator beings are very often already part of the landscape, as we see in Tolai belief with the great volcanoes of La Kupua (great Mother) and her relatives near Rabaul, East New Britain, and as we also find with collective culture-bearing deities or heroes that come along the coasts or over the mountains in “mythic times” with their gifts of skills (to garden, hunt, etc.) or useful objects (canoes, weapons, etc.). Sometimes sky gods are present, such as Aitawe, the sustainer of all things (in the western highland Enga people’s worldview), and the sun and moon treated as deities, thought to lay “eggs” on the Earth in the form of black stones (used for cultic purposes,
as with the southern highland Huli). But the landscape-connected deities predominate in the whole region, along with place spirits (tok pisin: masalai) living in dangerous lairs, sickness-bearing sprites, sprites or tricksters, and the dead. The dead are usually conceived as going to places more or less laterally positioned: to the mountaintops where they are buried (western highland Wahgj); down in caves at the end of rivers (lower highland Daribi); to the distant west (the coastal Papuan Toaripi); or to an isle of the blessed called Tuma (Papuan Trobriand islanders, the last two cultures with Austronesian languages).

The understanding of place and its meanings will vary with local features and culturo-linguistic inheritances. Take the Austronesian Sentani, for instance, living around the great Lake Sentani in northern Irian Jaya (West Papua). The world is described as Above-Below (bumanana-ana), and might seem vertically oriented, but in practice horizontal preoccupations dictate all. The root of the cosmic Waringin tree may have broken in heaven, but it tumbles onto the island of Ayauwo on the lake and takes root, generating the primal village of Abar in the earth, which, along with other villages, is dug up by the spirit-being Uaropo. Creative energies are more associated with the lake and its surroundings, and these potencies are taken over the mountains to coastal places. The lake and its bay sustain all life and bear many meaningful implications for human livelihood. There is no word for nature, or a sense of responsibility for it, but only a givenness of the locale with signs from it recognized through ancestral lore. Every year (in our late December), for instance, the lake turns yellow and yields up many struggling fish, and villages wait for the right time to kill them in plenty before they die. Among other phenomena, strange turbulences near a village presage the death of a chief (ondofofo); a great deal of fish dying in one spot foreshadows the death of a great personage; a child dying in the lake or the bay becomes a fish relative, and in this sense a totem, such as a swordfish (and though no word for totem is present, a proscription against eating it applies). Environmental attitudes are not independent of concerns for group prosperity and social explanations.

In a mountainous region, the feel will be very different. Take the Papuan highland Fuyughe, in a world of steep mountains and few wide valleys. Each cluster of related and allied hamlets live beneath a recognized mountainous configuration, that in turn is protected by a place spirit (called sila) guarding the heights. No one gardens the heights, it is dangerous to enter them alone, the presence of a sila being recognized by a hunting party, let us say, through the appearance of a giant python. Gardening, trading expeditions, feasting, and fighting are all done on a “medial strip,” just before valleys drop steeply into ravines. The respect for sila prevents the possibility of unchecked surprise raids by enemies, because no war party will ever take a secret route through the high forest for fear of trespassing on one’s foes’ protected area. While the mountains deeply condition their picturing of the world, the Fuyughe are unusual for having some sense of every “species” needing to survive. Every named type of living thing – a winged bird type, cassowaries, pigs, opossums, reptiles, and also people – possesses an utame, that is, a special instance of it (it seems at times like a Platonic form!) that, if killed, would result in the death of the whole of a given [species]-group. Members of each hamlet learn the signs and contexts in which the possibility of making such a mistake would occur. Never kill a snake, for example, on a tribal borderland, where animal life is apparently prolific anyway. The most important utam of all was that of the chiefs (amande), and he could never leave his tribal area without fear of his group’s cosmos collapsing. Environmental sensitivities, in any case, are never separated from concerns for military and social survival.

Generally, as is the strong implication of these examples, Melanesians found maximum security in their places of habitation (house lines, hamlets, villages), some in their gardens, and the least security in the forest. Yet the forest was usually conceived as sacred for being the habitation of the spirits, the very epitome of horizontal orientations. What can be translated as the sacred, though, is not always positive. The central highlander Faiwolmin, for instance (straddling Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea), talk both of the good sacred (anang awem) – of ancestral sites and initiatory seclusion centers in “the bush,” men’s houses, cult objects, and great leaders in the hamlets – and of the bad sacred (awem tem) – for masalai places, ghosts, and the enemies’ appropriations of spirit powers. (On further central highlands variations, cf. Papua New Guinea.) Where dependency on a lake or the sea is involved, a spirit-being lies behind the cycles of plenty (cases from from Sentani to Oavulu, Fiji).

Other themes to note concern naming the environment (with gender associations, for instance, so that dry places are male, wet places, such as valleys, female); fertility cults, some with goddesses (e.g., Timbehes on Nissan Island); sanctions against greed and personal prestige accrued from sharing and generosity; and a sense of interconnectedness with animals (men as birds; sorcerers entering creatures to strike, etc.). A debate also surrounds whether feasting, especially the large-scale pig killing in the highlands, is determined by ecological factors, such as the need to kill off a surplus of pigs (see A. Vayda and R. Rappaport 1968) rather than on group/human will. One certainly needs to appreciate that groups exercise their organizing power when they see circumstances (including environmental ones) allowing for it, but of course they can err in their judgments.

These religio-environmental values persist in group consciousness throughout Melanesia, but they are always in danger of being subverted in a new world of individual
Melanesian entrepreneurs and greedy politicians. Each small society tends not to hold the values of their neighbors or other groups in any esteem, so it has been necessary, in nationalist rhetoric and eco-theological discourse, to appeal in the modern context to spiritual and conservationist values that transcend cultural particularities.

Garry W. Trompf

Further Reading
See also: Polynesian Traditional Religions.

Memoir and Nature Writing
A memoir (from the French “to remember”) is essentially a record of specific times and places kept alive through recall and based primarily on first-hand knowledge rather than research. Nature narratives that also explore deeply felt issues through the lens of personal experience may then be grouped as memoirs for fruitful consideration. Historically, the range of materials that inform memoirs, or that share similar preoccupations, includes: letters, diaries, journals or biographical sketches, as well as personal essays and spiritual autobiographies. The act of writing, too, is significant; since composing one’s memoir serves as a rite of return, the writing becomes a place apart, a circumscribed landscape as it were, where the author gains a foothing, fresh perspective and not a little consolation.

Where loss colors a work, an elegiac tone separates the memoir from more pragmatic strains of nature writing. By definition, memoirs are a less pragmatic vehicle; their primary orientation is the self and its relations with the world. While self-absorption may be inherent in the task, memoir writing is actually a powerful antidote to narcissism once an author learns how to adapt this literary form to the genuine search for self-knowledge. Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and Terry Tempest Williams’s Refuge are classic nature memoirs that succeed in balancing deeply personal questions with nuanced inquiry into broader cultural issues. This willingness to admit to rigorous self-examination, which has so shaped spiritual autobiography in Western literature, suggests that the nature memoir is also heir to a similar quest. However distant Augustine’s Confessions seem from nature writing, it is important to recall the formative influence religious figures have played in contemplating the self’s relationship to nature and the vitality of even their most misguided conclusions. From the Waters of Prayer in Teresa of Avila’s A Life to Thomas Merton’s Seven Storey Mountain, Western confessional classics are redolent with spiritual images drawn from nature’s palate.

Religious roots are also evident in nature writing’s earliest classics. Gilbert White’s The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne (1789) faithfully reconciles Christian belief with scientific inquiry. White and naturalist theologians such as John Ray were not the least conflicted in confirming the divine order behind nature’s complexities. A more controversial follower of Linnaeus, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was no nature writer, yet his final collection of confessional essays, Reveries of the Solitary Walker (1782), still echo in today’s wistful testimonials about finding solace in the natural world.

With European expansion in North America, the overwhelming power of uncolonized nature was commonly exploited, feared, or decried as moral wilderness. By the nineteenth century, Romantic recommendations of nature’s salutary effects (as opposed to the corrupting influences of civilization and excessive domesticity) diverged sharply from pioneer struggles to conquer nature and to wrest a decent living from its grasp. This tension between hostile and benevolent visions of nature cropped up in the recollections of Transcendentalists and immigrants alike. However, consider the bold assurances in Emerson’s “Nature” and Thoreau’s Walden alongside ambivalent accounts of rearing children in the woods. Susannah Moodie (Roughing it in the Bush, or, Life in Canada, 1852) and her sister, Catherine Parr Traill (The Backwoods of Canada, 1836), were English gentlewomen who pioneered in Upper Canada (now central Ontario). Warning ostensible colonists abroad about the joys and hazards of surviving in the wild, their works soon became classics – astute observations of natural detail tempered with Victorian clarity on the moral dimensions of wilderness beauty, usefulness and danger.

Eventually, nature memoirs with a confessional bent lost ground to writings with a more secular ring. Sporting narratives, for instance, unencumbered by religious agendas, offered a haven from “softer” naturalist leanings.
that veered off into cosmology. Thanks to recent authors who have elevated the fish tale to mythic proportions, avid anglers and mystics alike are again dipping into the same stream (Norman Maclean, *A River Runs through It*; David James Duncan, *My Story as Told by Water*).

Memoirs of exotic places (Bruce Chatwin, *Songlines*; Peter Matthiessen, *The Tree Where Man was Born*) have always been popular, but musings on domestic landscapes have also had a loyal following. Garden autobiographies, which originated in the 1850s, quickly became a celebrated genre that fused cultural, personal and natural histories (see Douglas Chambers, *Stonyground: The Making of a Canadian Garden*). Often written in highly evocative prose with a pronounced mythological cast, early examples plumb Genesis to Milton in search of the model garden and, by extension, the model relationship between humans and nature. Not unlike wilderness parks, gardens were viewed as sacred landscapes that instructed humans about the right relationship between people and place. Strong moral preoccupations informed these inquiries, reasoning that, if Eden was the primordial scene of order, then the garden was nature properly tended.

Often the product of a mature writer’s lifelong preoccupations (Barry Lopez, *About This Life*), the memoir reflects highly charged personal as well as cultural associations. Common themes include numinous experiences in either strange or familiar landscapes (Sharon Butala, *The Perfection of the Morning*) and similar encounters with animals (Rick Bass, *The Ninemile Wolves*). Land as text is also a significant, if problematic, theme, as memoirs try to render human experience and place mutually intelligible. The memoir allows a writer – and, by extension, a reader – the luxury of exploring place through stories about wild inhabitants and the varieties of human experience fostered in a particular landscape. The storied landscape is an important theme that informs our search for morals, as contemporary naturalists consistently call for right living, instead of seeking the rare uplifting encounter with the wild (Alison Deming, *The Edges of the Civilized World*). Over the past decades, shifts in cultural and religious values have made memoirs increasingly important records that chart this evolving dialogue in nature ethics.

With this lofty mandate, do memoirs have pitfalls? Yes, the writerly danger is that natural forces are simply reduced to symbols or totems that bear the burden of human yearning. Even with the best of intentions, the tendency to use nature for the purposes of the writer’s own personal inquiry is a hazard. Literary sins range from anthropomorphizing and sentimentalizing to just plain missing the obvious. The tendency to reduce wilderness to meditations on human feelings about wilderness invariably breeds otherwise good nature writing, yet the hunch that wildness is our rightful partner in the search for self-knowledge is not misguided. Problems occur when the approach becomes a conceit rather than a discipline. Nature writing requires humility, attentiveness, and detachment from self-serving digressions. At its best, the memoir is an exercise in studied looking and an avenue to finely tuned contemplation. This is Lopez at the river “with no intention but to sit and watch”; this is Dillard’s “stalking.”

These values, in particular, suggest that nature memoirs share more religious undercurrents than is commonly recognized. Conventional and unconventional pieties have influenced the spiritual and artistic formation of naturalists for generations. Authors who see the world as the site of contemplation (Wendell Berry) or conversion (John Muir, Mary Sojourner) often turn to explicitly religious language to convey their experiences. Indeed, religious language is often the only way to communicate ineffable experiences, intuitions and that instinctual, dreaming knowledge that a mechanical culture invariably tries to suppress. Yet the question goes beyond that of language. Understanding religious roots and spiritual leanings allows us to appreciate a whole worldview. Those who can steer through statistics to a discerning evaluation of the facts possess a strong moral compass – a compass we turn to again and again. Consider the Calvinistic restraint echoed in Dillard, Berry and Lopez, which continues to provide powerful moral ballast in these darkening times.

Nature memoirs may convey astonishing revelations or prophesies about the natural world, but they must be authentic and authoritative to be trusted. The adventurer who risks returning to the past to retrieve riches for the tribe is a valuable culture-bringer, but is he or she committed to watching and to listening over the course of a lifetime? If memoirs are a reliable gauge of an author’s integrity, they seem to tell us that the finest guides make no pretensions to exhaustive knowledge at all. Rather, they urge the acquisition of knowledge in order to develop (or submit to) the discipline of seeing, witnessing, and attending to the thing itself. If anything, these individuals are expert at not knowing – what in mysticism is referred to as the apophatic way – and at grappling with the holy limits of all forms of knowledge.

The nature of that commitment makes the memoir a powerful spiritual and imaginative tool for writers, let alone for readers, who are instructed by places, actual and imagined, that most of us may never see.

Susan L. Scott

Further Reading
Men of the Trees (East Africa)

One of the pioneering movements in social forestry was Men of the Trees, now known as the International Tree Foundation, founded by Richard St. Barbe Baker (1889–1982) among the Kikuyu in Kenya in 1922, when he was Assistant Conservator of Forests for the British Colonial Office. Members of Men of the Trees committed to planting ten trees every year and to protecting trees everywhere. The organization was a response to widespread forest destruction and soil loss leading to desertification. St. Barbe, as he was known to his friends, was a deeply spiritual man with a profound respect for traditional cultures and peoples and a long-standing membership in the Bahá’í Faith. After a further forestry assignment in Nigeria, he began to travel the world writing and lecturing about forest conservation between diplomatic representatives and a stated interest in relations with the natural world. His view of forests was simultaneously scientific, aesthetic and spiritual. His extensive writings shared the wonder, beauty and sacredness of nature while teaching ecological principles and respect. By integrating science and religion, he saw the potential for a mature planetary civilization based on ecological and spiritual principles.

Arthur Dahl

Further Reading


See also: Bahá’í Faith; Druids and Druidry; Green Man.

Men’s Movement

In the wake of late twentieth-century feminist challenges to prevalent understandings and practices of gender in modern Western societies, a number of men within these societies undertook to fashion, individually and collectively, responses to feminism’s wide-ranging critiques. Beginning in the 1970s, “movements” of these men arose, some in conscious alliance with contemporary feminist goals and methods (e.g., “profeminist men”), others in more or less hostile reaction against them (e.g., “men’s rights” groups). Some of these “men’s movements” linked their gender concerns with a spiritual or religious focus and a stated interest in relations with the natural world.

Of these latter groups, the most widely publicized exemplar was the “mythopoetic men’s movement,” which attained its greatest popularity in the decade or so surrounding the 1990 publication of its formative text, the poet Robert Bly’s Iron John: A Book about Men, an
extended exegesis of a fairytale collected by the Grimm brothers. As its name implies, this movement looked to myth and ritual as primary sources for the sort of self-transformation its adherents - primarily heterosexual Euro-American men of at least moderate means - sought. Through the medium of paid workshops and multi-day retreats (generally held in "wilderness" settings), Bly and other teachers advanced the theory that contemporary men in industrialized societies, having escaped stultifying 1950s-style masculinity only to become mired in a debilitating "softness" attributable, at least in part, to feminism, were in need of a distinctly masculine spirituality. And this, Bly argued, was available to them through connection with the "deep masculine," an archetype force personified in the mythic figure of the "wildman." "What I'm suggesting," he wrote, "... is that every modern man has, lying at the bottom of his psyche, a large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet. Making contact with this Wild Man is the step the Eighties male or the Nineties male has yet to take" (Bly 1990: 6). Bly was explicit about the religious dimensions of this quest for a fundamental masculinity: "Getting in touch with the wildman means religious life for a man in the broadest sense of the phrase" (in Thompson 1987: 180). For men who embraced this path, the mythopoetic leaders offered a "practice" composed of guided interpretations of (primarily European) myths and folk-tales, participation in (primarily Native American- and African-derived) "initiation" rituals, and group-therapy-style personal sharing, all of which was intended to bring men into experiential contact with the primal "wildness" that Bly and his colleagues identified as essentially masculine. Undergirding the entire mythopoetic approach was a neo-Jungian belief in transhistorical, gender-appropriate archetypes (e.g., wildman, king, warrior) to be embraced on the way to healthy manhood in the late twentieth century. Through deeply felt, ritualized engagement with these designated "masculine" figures, within the context of an all-male group, participants hoped to be initiated into a more vital, self-assured gender identity.

As already noted, "wildness" was a term of value in the mythopoetic men's movement's vocabulary - both the wildness believed to be at the heart of "deep masculinity" and the wildness that characterized the natural settings in which much of the ritual work of initiation took place. Bly considered it necessary for men to reach beneath and beyond civilized society, into a wider realm of nature encompassing the more chaotic - yet more fruitful - elements of the human psyche: "The Wild Man is not opposed to civilization; but he's not completely contained by it either" (Bly 1990: 8). Accordingly, mythopoetic men's groups convened in outdoor settings at some remove from civilized "confinements": there, they engaged in communal drumming sessions, sweatlodges, and other ritual practices designed to promote intragroup bonding and a feeling of connection with such "natural" manifestations of masculinity as "fierce" animals (e.g., bears, wolves). Although it is unclear whether such ritual use of "wild" settings ever went beyond a sort of nature-as-backdrop approach, to the point of actual connection and conscious interaction with a specific place, there was, among at least some men in the mythopoetic movement, a stated generalized concern for the well-being of the Earth: "Men have traditionally been the guardians of the earth... It's time for men to wake up and take this historical role again. We need to define the new warriors. Men are called to be warriors for the earth" (Craver 1996: 69). Here, characteristically, the call for male ecological responsibility was couched in terms of the traditional archetype of the warrior.

Frequently ridiculed by the mass media - the spectacle of middle-class white men taking to the woods to beat on drums and "get in touch with their inner wildman" provided an easy target - the mythopoetic men's movement attracted more substantive criticism from feminists, profeminist men, and Native American observers. Feminists condemned the reliance of Bly and others on an essentialist account of "natural" gender difference - the unproblematicized (and inevitably prescriptive) linking of specifically delineated "masculine" and "feminine" modes of being with biologically male and female human beings, respectively, despite the wide cultural and individual variation displayed by actual men and women, boys and girls. Feminists and profeminist men objected no less strongly to this men's movement's indifference to - if not outright denial of - persisting power differentials between men and women. Noting the generally privileged constituency of this movement - "those [men] who quietly benefit from patriarchy without being militant in its defence" - sociologist R.W. Connell characterized it as a form of "masculinity therapy" whose consequence would be nothing more than "an adaptation of patriarchal structures through the modernization of masculinity" (Connell 1995: 210, 211; italics in original). Finally, Native American criticism of the mythopoetic men's movement focused especially on its arguably neo-colonialist appropriation of indigenous spiritual practices: "... to play at ritual potluck is to debase all spiritual traditions, voiding their internal coherence and leaving nothing usably sacrosanct as a cultural anchor for the peoples who conceived and developed them" (Churchill 1996: 371).

With the fading of this men's movement from cultural prominence, questions concerning existing and desirable relations among men, gender, religion, and nature remain to be explored. A number of men influenced by ecofeminism, including J. Michael Clark, Seth Mirsky, and John Rowan, have produced work in this area suggestive of alternative future possibilities for a men's movement.

Seth Mirsky
Further Reading
See also: Feminist Spirituality Movement; Green Man; Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing; Jung, Carl Gustav; Plastic Medicine Men; Radical Environmentalism.

Merchant, Carolyn (1936–)

As one of the first prominent environmental historians, Carolyn Merchant weaves ecofeminist methodologies into her philosophical, ethical and historical inquiry. Her approach focuses on the interrelationships between productive and reproductive forces, in both human and nonhuman history, as well as the metaphoric connections between women and nature. Merchant integrates the history of science, ecology (which she views as a “subversive science”) and cultural studies in order to present a holistic environmental history.

In 1980, Merchant published *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. She begins this groundbreaking work with the statement: “The world we have lost was organic” (1980: 1). From there she examines the formation of a worldview and science focused on the domination of both nature and women. Thus, as “Western culture became increasingly mechanized in the 1600s, the female earth and the virgin earth spirit were subdued by the machine” (1980: 2). Focused initially on pastoral imagery, this shifting worldview assumed women and nature to be nurturing and passive, benevolent and willingly manipulated. Functionally, however, perceptions of nature as female did limit certain abusive practices (i.e., it was a “violation of Mother Earth” to engage in mining) (1980: 32). Merchant sees Bacon’s publication *A New Atlantis*, with its “mechanistic utopia,” as a symbolic of a turning point. Bacon writes from the perspective of paralleling mechanical devices to interrogate suspected witches and the mechanical torture of nature by science. His idea of scientific progress focused on control of nature as a way to remedy the “Fall” and return to paradise in the Garden of Eden. This is a metaphorical construct that Merchant continues to analyze in *Reinventing Eden: Women, Nature, and Narrative*.

Merchant proceeds to trace the influence of mechanical modeling in society as a whole. She contends that the “brilliant achievement of mechanism” is its “reordering of reality around two fundamental constituents of human experience—order and power” (2003: 216). God becomes a clockmaker, the world becomes a machine comprised of inert particles. Order and power form the basis for patriarchal structures throughout society. By analyzing the whole, thus subverting the very societal model she addresses, Merchant’s work helped shape the core issues of ecofeminist dialogue, including discussions of problematic essentialisms in connecting women and nature.

Merchant’s contributions extend into analysis of, and participation in, environmental activism. Her examination of the contradictions between production, ecology and reproduction suggests that these dynamics have contributed to the global ecological crisis of the late twentieth century. She argues that policy shifts cannot respond adequately to the rapidly increasing ecological stress. Radical alternatives—spiritual, economic, scientific—are requisite. Merchant emphasizes the reality and promise of diverse visions and actions arising in different parts of the world (see *Radical Ecology*). She also helps to delineate various ecofeminisms, such as socialist, radical, liberal and cultural, thus reemphasizing the fact that myriad voices contribute to this complex movement.

Merchant received her doctorate in the History of Science from the University of Wisconsin, Madison and is Professor of Environmental History, Philosophy and Ethics at the University of California, Berkeley. She has written or edited seven books, published myriad articles and helped to establish the American Society for Environmental History.

Laura Hobgood-Oster
Further Reading
See also: Descartes, René, and the Problem of Cartesian Dualism; Dualism; Ecofeminism; Eden and Other Gardens; Fall, The; Feminist Spirituality Movement; Holism; Radical Environmentalism; Women and Animals.

Merwin, W.S. (William Stanley) (1927–)

In an early poem, “The Wilderness,” from *Green with Beasts* (1956), the American poet W.S. Merwin wrote:

Remoteness is its own secret. Not holiness,
Though, nor the huge spirit miraculously avoiding
The way’s dissemblings . . . (Merwin 1988a: 33).

By way of example, these lines indicate how carefully Merwin’s poetry approaches the relation between religion and nature. Separating himself from claims that God resides in nature, through his poems Merwin pursues personal religiosity animated by the longing for a revelation of self and a sense of totality. Yet Merwin’s poetry hinges on the idea that at best one can perceive only discrete parts of physical reality. This view of the person–nature relationship places Merwin’s poetry in proximity to the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, especially in its fascination with the details of careful observation.

While Merwin’s poetry renders nature as fragments – like hands or feet, or in his later poetry the particulars of the biological world – it also represents an intense awareness of the kind of absence run through with meaning. And where there is absence there is also a sense of loss. In this way, Merwin’s poetry suggests a relationship to nature that is elegiac, yet in a relative sense, static, asserting that wherever we are, we are surrounded by where we are not. This sort of absence acquires value to the extent that it is sought out, yet remains unknown.

Frequently, it is Merwin’s careful rendering of the natural cycles of life and death that leads toward self-discovery. In this sense, Merwin’s poetic vision places substantial attention on autobiography. He grew up as the son of a Presbyterian minister, and in later life he studied Zen Buddhism. In the books that follow *The Lice* (1967), the sense of the continuity of life becomes increasingly expansive and considerably less anthropocentric, as the poems represent life in more fundamentally biological terms. Later, the short poems of *Finding the Islands* (1982) represent a union of aesthetic and spiritual experience similar to that found in early haiku writers like Bashō.

Parallel to their focus on natural cycles, some of Merwin’s poems harshly render humankind’s urge to plunder nature, thus creating discontinuity in the form of ecological disaster. Reflecting a keen awareness of the influence both Linnaeus and Charles Darwin had on twentieth-century attitudes toward the natural world, Merwin’s poetry presents, especially from *The Lice* onward, a fine-tuned ecopoetic sensibility that becomes increasingly pervasive in his poetry. In *The Rain in the Trees* (1988) Merwin’s ecopoetics reached a high point at which he combined the rhetoric of absence that fueled his early writing with an elegiac sensibility associated with environmental degradation. At one point, he asserted that nature is wiser than humans: “I will have to decipher the language of the insects” (1988b: 50). Through the 1990s, Merwin’s poetry focused on horticultural and autobiographical matters, allowing the poems to continue exploring the border area that links the world of nature to the mystery of human religious experience.

James Kraus

Further Reading
See also: Autobiography.

Mesoamerican Deities

Mesoamerican deities wield natural powers, live in the natural world, and follow natural processes. Moreover, while deities control natural forces, natural entities control deified forces. All deities embody the powers of various natural forces such as rain, lightning, wind, growth, death and decay that allow them to interact with and affect other beings. Likewise, natural entities such as celestial objects, mountains, streams, plants, animals, and humans can embody powers that give them life, deify them, allowing them to interact with and affect other beings. Because all these beings – deities with natural
The Spanish Conquest (1521) brought major changes to Mesoamerica on all fronts from political to social. Nevertheless, all pre-Conquest forms of life did not simply disappear, for the conquest was not complete on any level, including the spiritual. Religious conversions to Catholicism occurred so rapidly and often under such coercive conditions that superficiality proved inevitable. Long periods of isolation for many indigenous peasants also weakened the Church’s oversight.

As a result, often the converts understood their new religion in idiosyncratic ways having little to do with what the Church fathers thought they were teaching them. The indigenous folk likely saw Jesus as the victor over their now defeated patron deities; and because in pre-Conquest times patron deities often returned to power as competing cities shifted their alliances, the same expectation sometimes existed after the Conquest. Throughout the following centuries, patron deities in diverse, imaginative forms – pre- and post-Conquest gods, indigenous and Christian, or blends thereof – rose to lead various peasant groups in rebellion against an often oppressive governing elite. Everyone, from the Feathered Serpent God and the long-dead Maya leader Can Ek to the Virgin Mother Guadalupe, has led revolts in the last 500 years. Moreover, today many earthly and celestial topographies have come to house either or both local deities and saints (some of whom Rome has never heard of); the Devil has set up housekeeping in the wet underground; many a cook blesses the four quarters of the cosmos as she grills the day’s first tortilla; and one may sacrifice a chicken following ancient traditions to celebrate Christian communion. Some view indigenous and Christian traditions as mutually contradictory, others as one unified tradition. Through both continuity and invention, pre-Conquest theological conceptions have remained alive and well throughout Mesoamerica’s long history up to the present.

Today as before, deities’ lives and personalities often closely reflect the particular environment within which they dwell. Mesoamerica enjoys a diverse geography and climate. This ranges from deserts to tropical and mountainous regions, which boast both active and inactive volcanoes. However, in spite of its jungles and rainforests, the Archaic era on, Mesoamerica has lived with a mostly semi-arid climate, making water scarce. By the late Preclassic (ca. 1521–1808), and the era of Independence (ca. 1808–present), Mesoamerica stretches roughly from what is now northern Mexico into Nicaragua. Its long history began with hunter-gatherers in the Paleoindian era ca. 25,000–7000 B.C.E.). This period was followed by six more: the Archaic (ca. 7000–2000 B.C.E.); the Preclassic (ca. 2000 B.C.E.–250 C.E.); the Classic (ca. 250–1000); the Postclassic (ca. 1000–1521); the era of Spanish Conquest and Colonialism (ca. 1521–1808); and the era of Independence to the present (beginning ca. 1808). The Archaic was marked by the slow development of agriculture and more settled life. By the Preclassic, the first urban centers had developed. While many of these pre-Conquest cities claimed no more than 30,000–40,000 inhabitants, some contained very large populations. Tenochtitlan (ca. 1350–1521), the center of the Aztec (more properly Mexico) domain, held approximately 250,000 inhabitants within its island borders; around one million more lived in villages and other urban centers throughout the Valley of Mexico where Tenochtitlan was located (Mexico City’s several million inhabitants now sit on Tenochtitlan’s remains). Besides countless deified beings with which each center’s inhabitants interacted, a patron deity governed each city, giving it life and strength, thereby creating a distinctive ritual and pilgrimage center. Each center constituted a complex, stratified yet flexible society of many groups ranging from governing elite, to religious professionals, warriors, traders, educators, healers, craftspeople, and farmers. Moreover, these urban centers often competed for power creating a situation of shifting alliances among them.

Four major cultural areas dominated Mesoamerica from early pre-Conquest times: the Olmec (ca. 2500–300 B.C.E.); Oaxaca (ca. 1400 B.C.E.–present); the Mexican highland peoples (ca. 1200 B.C.E.–present); and the Maya (ca. 1400 B.C.E.–present). Two of these, the Olmec and Mexican highland peoples, at times wielded great influence and sometimes considerable direct power over extensive geographic expanses. The other two, the Maya and those living in Oaxaca, have tended toward more regional forms of influence; nevertheless, their contributions to Mesoamerican life in general have proven considerable through time. While all four areas share key cultural traits, each also claims its own characteristics and distinctive spins on those traits.
forces. Water is needed for agriculture, and corn – one of the most ancient and thirsty crops – forms a basic metaphor for human sustenance. Beings must drink and eat to sustain life; and since humans drink water and eat corn, these two natural entities have come to symbolize life itself. For some nonhuman beings, the blood and flesh of humans and other animals is the symbolic life–sustaining equivalent of water and corn for humans. For centuries, sacrifice has symbolized a natural feeding exchange in which beings ate and fed each other. Ritual sacrifice formed the heart of pre-Conquest religious practice; and although humans no longer serve as offerings, it continues today in altered, often Christian forms.

Local environments also form symbolic, deified celestial and earthly topographies. Each town marks space beginning with its center: in pre-Conquest days, where the temple stood; today, where the church or town plaza stands. From there, the four cardinal directions are marked, each supported by a cosmic tree, mountain, bird, rain god, saint, or any combination thereof. The center rests on Earth’s Surface, which takes the form of a four petaled flower, one petal for each direction. People, animals, and plants live on dry Earth’s Surface, which some myths describe as the back of a great monster. The Ollinec said this monster was a giant fish floating in the sea, the Mexico described it as a crocodilian beast whom Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca twisted in two. One half became the sky, the other created plants, flowers, trees, springs, caves, mountains and valleys. But the beast was so hurt by her destruction that she cried out, and would not be quieted unless fed human hearts as a debt-payment for her own sacrifice.

In many towns, actual mountains mark the cardinal directions, and real caves, springs, or underground rivers mark entrances to the cavernous Underworld lying beneath Earth’s Surface. The mountains at the four corners, and sometimes the center, are viewed as defied pots whose underworld innards contain water and seeds that produce corn and other edible plants. The rain gods guard these giant pots, thunderously striking them open with their lightning bolts when it comes time to release rain. But, not all moisture is good. An Oaxacan story says that one of these mountain-pots contained good flower-producing rain; but a second, volcanic fiery rain; a third, fungus-producing rain; a fourth, wind-storm rain; and a fifth, icy flint-blade rain. For the Mexica, one pot brought drought.

Below in the Underground, everything is opposite from life on Earth’s Surface. Below it is wet, above it is dry; below things point downward, above things point upward toward the sky. The Underworld beings, delightful characters bearing names like Lord and Lady of Death (Mexica), or Pus and Jaundice Masters, Bone and Skull Scepters, or Bloody Teeth and Bloody Claws (K’iche’ Maya), eat rotting and dead things such as tortillas of fungi, beans of fly larvae, and corn paste of decayed human flesh. The Panajachel Maya said that, if one partook of such pseudo-human food, one would be forced to remain there forever. They also said that the Devil lived there and ate food made of blood collected by his vampire bat cook. Because everyone does at least some bad things during life, upon death one spends time there before going to heaven; rich landowners who treated their workers poorly, however, were so bad they never got out. Nevertheless, no matter how forbidding the Underworld is, life cannot live without its destructive, corruptive forces. Corn grows on Earth’s Surface, but pushes its roots into the Underworld to feed on its watery, decaying excrement. And the Sun and all other celestial objects move through its underground passages on a daily basis. When the Sun rises from the beast’s bowels at dawn, the Moon is just entering its mouth; and when it is day above, it is night below.

The Sky soars above Earth’s Surface, and like the Underworld it too is a watery realm. Water completely surrounds the Mesoamerican cosmos, trapping the dry air bubble in which people live on Earth’s Surface. The Sky forms the liquid walls of a great house, while Earth’s Surface serves as both a floor of this house and that of the upside-down Underworld. Like Earth’s Surface and the Underworld, the Sky is divided into quadrants. The Mexica said that Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca met at the celestial crossroads to create the cosmos, and the K’iche’ say that four roads move out from the center: a red road moves east; a black, north; a white, west; and a yellow, south. The colonial Yucatec Maya said that four gods called the Bacabs planted the four cosmic trees holding up the Sky. Others say that the Sky moves up seven steps like a pyramid, and six down; this motion is reversed as one moves into the Underworld, seven steps down and six up.

But unlike the Underworld, living people do not enter the Sky, perhaps because they cannot fly. Nonhuman beings and dead ancestors pass along the Sky’s watery passages like boaters navigating a great river. The sun, moon and stars all follow the Sky’s particular currents; and birds fly through the air bubble above Earth’s Surface to the Sky, sometimes also swooping into the Underworld through its cave-doors. Some also say that dead ancestors move to the Sky becoming stars, clouds, birds, or butterflies. Once the Panajachel have paid for their sins by doing time working for the Devil in the Underworld, they go as stars to a great heavenly city to live with God the Sun, all the apostles, the saints and their dead ancestors. Moreover, it is God who makes it rain by rippling his hand over the Sky’s watery surface; to make storms, God wildly splashes the water.

Many tell tales about animals and their various antics. Opossums – those odd little holdovers from the Cenozoic era – become the protagonists in many a creation story. Opossum is often said to have brought fire, having stolen
it from the old fire-god or the first people to have discovered it. Today’s Huichol tell how once upon a time Opossum was cold and asked if she could spend the night near the only fire around. Although the fire’s owners did not trust her, they agreed. In the morning when she was ready to leave, they searched her, but did not find the little coal she had tucked into her pouch. When they discovered a coal was missing, they pursued her, caught her, and beat her into many pieces, leaving her for dead. But Opossum “play possum,” and can take a great deal of physical abuse. When they had left, she regained consciousness, and began thinking about the problem. She put all her pieces back in place: her skin, hair, sandals, hands, top of her head, brains, everything. Then she thought, “My goodness! Suppose they grabbed that little piece I hid in my pocket!” But looking into her pouch, she found it still there. Taking it, she began to blow it gently into life – wiwiwiwiwiwiwi. This is the reason the Huichol never eat opossums; without her, they would never have had fire.

And so stories go on, spinning new-old tales about deities’ natural powers and deified natural entities. A long creative, continuity can be traced to the earliest of times; and root metaphors speaking of creation from destruction and natural forces flow through most of these tales. The Earth Monster eats the Sun each evening, only to emit it out in the morning; things growing on Earth’s Surface eat the Underworld’s moist decay, and death’s living beyond moves through both the Underworld and the Sky. Even fire comes from a clever little creature who reconstituted herself after having been destroyed. If one observes natural processes closely, all this comes clearer. Deities control such forces as water, wind, and death, and deified natural entities hold water in their innards, support the sky, and steal fire. And so life goes on, and on, and on.

Kay A. Read

Further Reading
See also: Aztec Religion – Pre-Colombian; Chihuacoatl – Aztec Snakewoman; Maya Religion (Central America); Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Mesoamerican Sacrifice; Virgin of Guadalupe.

Mesoamerican Sacrifice

Ancient Mesoamerican sacrifice nourished the world’s beings, thereby supporting life and growth. A natural, biological metaphor shaped sacrifice. To live, one must eat; and to eat one must kill something, which also must kill to eat to live. Moreover, ancient Mesoamericans considered almost all things to be living. Hence, ritual sacrifice formed a feeding exchange among various living beings of the cosmos including gods, humans, animals, plants, celestial objects like the sun, and even earthly entities like mountains and streams. All these living entities both killed to eat and died to feed other beings. Performing a sacrificial ritual meant one was paying one’s debt to the various forces in the universe; since various beings of the cosmos sacrificed themselves so one might eat, one needed to return the favor by feeding them. No free lunch existed.

Moreover, this natural sacrificial eating exchange seems to have been symbolically linked with another natural metaphor involving transformative cycles of creation and destruction. When one is born, one can do two things: eat and defecate. As one eats and defecates, one grows and transforms from a baby into a child, an adolescent, an adult with children of one’s own, a mature person, an elder, and finally one dies. To sustain one’s life between birth and death, one eats corn, which also moves through a natural life cycle. One consumes corn that has matured in the fields, and then one defecates the digested corn back in the fields to fertilize more new corn plants. The corn feeds people, and people feed corn. Finally, at death one’s body disintegrates, becoming the natural food of small insects and creatures living in the underworld. Such naturally creative-destructive, transformative cycles of birth, eating, defecation, feeding, growth and death continually shaped all existence.

While most are aware that the Aztecs (ca. 1350–1521) performed human sacrificial rituals, such sacrifice actually claims a long history in Mesoamerica. Splintered bones found in refuse deposits in the Preclassic Olmec site of San Lorenzo, Veracruz (ca. 1200–900 B.C.E.) suggest cannibal
practices, and similar bone deposits have appeared at Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico (ca. 400–600). The Preclassic Maya site of Cuello (Belize, ca. 400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.) boasts a burial with the sacrificial remains of 32 young men of warrior age in its main plaza. Cannibalism and war both have long histories as forms of sacrifice. Cannibalism makes sense, for if sacrifice constitutes an exchange, then cannibalism is no more than the human end of that eating exchange. And if sacrifice demands that something be caught and killed in order to eat it, then war becomes one of the ways in which meals are hunted, caught and killed. Still not all sacrifice involved human comestibles, or war.

Sacrificial rites could be extraordinarily varied, and most sacrifices were not even human. A huge variety of sacrificial meals were offered up using just about anything edible. Many considered the first tortilla of the day a sacrificial meal. Other offerings could include quail, fish, jaguars, crocodiles, snakes, salamanders, and amaranth cakes. Ritual bloodletting was one of the most common forms; small amounts of blood were offered on numerous ceremonial occasions, from family naming ceremonies of new-born Aztec babies to the high state ceremonies of Maya rulers.

Sacrificial techniques were equally varied. Extreme forms of human sacrifice included heart extraction, decapitation, drowning, and shooting with arrows or poison darts. Rituals involved both willing and unwilling participants, native and foreign born, from all segments of society, both male and female and of all ages. Who or what became the offering depended on who required sustenance at any particular moment. Hence, sacrificial rituals were performed for diverse reasons. Large state sacrifices usually were associated with war and political hegemony, the need to sustain the state. But, other sacrifices were associated with agricultural cycles; offered to celestial recipients such as the sun, moon and stars; or more earthly foci such as the earth monster, or water deities taking the forms of mountains, or streams.

Some have claimed that sacrifice’s origins rest in a protein deficiency resulting from a lack of domesticated animals. But this theory cannot account for the protein-rich diet already available to most Mesoamericans. They ate just about anything that walked, crawled, flew or swam; and studies now indicate that the natural Mesoamerican diet was a good one. Moreover, in Aztec times, very little of the sacrificial offerings were eaten, and that by only a few people who did not really need it at a time of year when food was most plentiful. Therefore, most scholars now accept that sacrifice’s purpose was to sustain various cosmic beings, not to make up for a nutritional deficiency.

With the Spanish Conquest (1521), a new form of sacrifice appeared in Mesoamerica: the one-time sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Many Spanish found human sacrifice an abomination. The Eucharistic celebration of Christ’s own last supper and sacrifice substituted bread and wine for human flesh and blood; it did not require actually killing anyone. Other forms of sacrifice proved more acceptable to the conquerors. Penitential practices involving fasting and offerings of food, birds and animals meshed more easily with medieval European practices. For their part, Mesoamericans quickly blended Christian sacrificial practices with their own traditions. Today, the sacrifice of chickens and other animal and plant comestibles in Christian ceremonies is quite common; and many faithful women still offer a meal’s first tortilla to the four quarters of the cosmos. Christian rituals also continue to celebrate various points of life’s transitions; agricultural cycles, birth, coming of age, and death all are commemorated now with a Christian sacrificial communion.

Kay A. Read

Further Reading


See also: Maya Religion (Central America); Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Maya Spirituality and Conservation (Western Highlands, Guatemala); Mayan Catholicism; Mayan Protestantism; Mesoamerican Deities.

Mesopotamia – Ancient to 2000 B.C.E.

The development of a complex set of beliefs and practices over the millennia in Mesopotamia, the land between the two great rivers of the Euphrates and the Tigris, seems to have had as its primary aim the explanation, understanding and control of this environment by humans. The early evidence for any kind of ritual or “religious”
behaviour is extremely scanty. There is no evidence at all from south Mesopotamia in the Paleolithic or pre-pottery-using Neolithic phases as the area seems to have been uninhabited. A very limited number of finds have, however, been made in the north of the region which date to the eighth/seventh millennia and which seem to point to the importance of wild animals and birds to the hunter-gatherers of the period. Wing bones from the skeletons of huge birds of prey have been found at a site called Zawi Chemi Shanidar piled together in such a way as to raise the possibility that the wings may originally have been specially preserved. The wing bones are associated with the skulls of wild sheep or goats. The excavator suggested that both were deliberately selected and may have been used to adorn the participants in rituals whose nature is unknown, but which may have been intended to placate the forces of nature and ensure the survival of the group. The importance of birds of prey and other wild animals to the hunter-gatherers who were the first people to live in the region is supported by remarkable new finds from Turkey of sculpted pillars showing these creatures in low relief at sites such as Nevali Çori in Eastern Turkey. In north Mesopotamia some remarkable small sculptures showing the heads of raptors from Nemrik, an early Neolithic site in northern Iraq, also point in the same direction. There are no traces of ritual buildings or of sacred artifacts during this early period, but the deliberate interment of human beings, sometimes with a few grave goods, may already indicate a belief in an afterlife.

By the sixth millennium B.C.E., when agriculture was well established in north Mesopotamia, we begin to find representations of men and women, though we do not know if these were gods or men. In some cultures at least, such as the so-called Halaf culture, their faces seem to be of little significance, and are often represented merely by blobs of clay. Such figurines are usually female and show women with huge thighs and a marked accumulation of fat on the buttocks. It can be suggested that they represent a generic concept of fertility rather than individuals. The fertility of animals and crops was of paramount importance to these early farmers while children provided useful additions to the workforce. In contrast to this, paintings on contemporary Samarra pottery from further south show heavily scarified faces, while the bodies are not shown. It is tempting to suggest that the scars represent group identifiers as in many traditional societies today, although of course, there could be other explanations. If this is the case then these are the first realistic representations of the human face in Mesopotamia. Remarkable human figurines in alabaster of similar date have been found in graves at the site of a fortified village near Baghdad called Tell es Sawwan, but their purpose is again unknown.

There are a range of burial rites from these early periods, which include cremation and burial of all or part of the body, probably pointing to a range of beliefs among the different groups in society, all concerned in their different ways with the proper disposal of the dead.

The evolving and transitional nature of beliefs at this time is striking. It is illustrated in south Mesopotamia by a number of human figurines with strange lizard-like heads modeled from clay. These figures are usually, but not exclusively female, some suckle babies, while one male figure carries what looks like a scepter. They date to the late sixth/early fifth millennium B.C.E. in the so-called Ubaid period and are found widely distributed in domestic settings as well as in graves. It is by no means certain that they represent supernatural beings, but such composite creatures could in no way be described as naturalistic representations and we may ask if they represent an intermediate step in the anthropomorphizing of natural forces, a process which was complete by the fourth millennium. It is also in the Ubaid period that the first cult buildings or temples appear in southern Iraq. Religious belief seems to be crystallizing and the divinities are represented as at least partially human for the first time. Burial rites also become more standardized and inhumation becomes the norm.

These developments coincide with the moment when human beings were first able to exert a measure of control over the forces of nature by the introduction of agriculture itself, and then of simple irrigation and storage techniques which gave them a small measure of control over the resources on which they depended for survival. As the impersonal natural forces of sun, wind, and storm, which had held early hunter-gatherers to ransom, became less all-powerful it is suggested that such forces began to appear more comprehensible and so could, for the first time, be visualized in human form. Once in human form it was possible, by analogy, to understand them better and to suggest ways in which they might be manipulated in order to maintain their favor, thus ensuring survival. The struggle by humans to control their environment had another weapon in its armory.

By the late fourth/early third millennium B.C.E. a fully urban civilization with irrigation systems and centralized storage of agricultural produce had emerged in the potentially fertile southern plains of Mesopotamia, the area which today lies between Baghdad and the head of the Arabian Gulf. People exerted more control over their environment than ever before, although it was recognized that this control was extremely tenuous. The humanization of natural forces continued and for the first time we have texts in the ancient cuneiform script, which allow us to reconstruct the names and personalities of the major deities. Archeology also enables us to rebuild their temples and reconstruct some of the rites that took place in them. The major deities represent natural forces or observed features in the landscape. Initially they have Sumerian names as most of the population seems to have spoken this language, then many acquired Semitic ones as the
linguistic composition of the population changed. The great gods include Anu the sky, Shamash the sun, Sin/Nannar the moon, Enlil the air/wind; all powerful forces in a flat desert landscape where temperatures can reach 50 degrees centigrade in high summer. It is no surprise in this sort of landscape that the god seen as the particular friend of humanity is the god of sweet water, Ea/Enki, a cunning and wise god who saves humankind from a great flood in a story that is the precursor of the biblical story of Noah. (It is curious that the great rivers on which the region depended for survival do not seem to have been deified.) Among the goddesses Ninhursag represented fruitfulness and Inanna/Ishtar was the capricious goddess of sexual love and of war. Many other less important deities represented other aspects of the natural world and the new skills and crafts such as writing and metallurgy. Anu, the sky god, ruled them all and humankind was created to look after the pantheon as the servants of often extremely demanding and irrational masters.

The composition of the pantheon was extremely flexible, reflecting perhaps the fact that there are few geographical boundaries in Mesopotamia so that new peoples often infiltrated the great plains. Their gods were frequently either added to the existing roll call or amalgamated with older deities. The Semitic Ishtar is amalgamated with her Sumerian predecessor Inanna, while Sumerian Anu becomes of less and less significance during the third millennium and Marduk the god of Babylon rises up the hierarchy to rule the gods, just as his city comes to dominate the political scene. With the advent of city states, politics as well as the environment began to play a role in religious thought.

A cosmology can be reconstructed from texts of the second millennium B.C.E., which also tells us how the ancient Mesopotamians saw their world. The gods inhabited the heavens, which were separated from Earth by the air. The Earth itself was flat and floated on a sea of sweet water. Heaven and Earth were formed from the corpse of a female monster called Tiamat, who had been slaughtered in mortal combat by Marduk. Each deity was responsible for a particular city and its prosperity depended on the goodwill of that god and on his or her advocacy in the assembly of the great gods where major decisions were taken about the future of humankind. From this it followed that the first duty of every person was to care for the god or goddess of his or her city in order to retain their goodwill. This duty fell most heavily on the priests who were charged with the day-to-day business of feeding, clothing and entertaining the deity in his temple or palace.

Rulers were chosen by the gods and were often said to have been suckled by goddesses, or like the great hero Gilgamesh, to be semi-divine themselves. Their main task was to oversee all the needs of their patron deity, building new temples when instructed to do so, providing lavish gifts, dedicating booty after a successful campaign, and where appropriate acting as the husband of the goddess in a sacred marriage, so ensuring the fertility of the land. Where the patron deity was male a high priestess apparently fulfilled this duty. Agriculture was the foundation of the region’s prosperity so that the link between environment and religion remained fundamental. Kingship was regularly withdrawn by the gods from one city and passed to another. Divine goodwill might be withdrawn for ritual infringements or because of neglect or other wrongdoing.

The underworld seems to have been a mirror image of the heavens; it was a gray, bleak place below the ground ruled by a ferocious queen called Erishkigal, a sister of Ishtar/Inanna who had at her command a court of demons and other officials who carried out her bidding as Anu did in heaven. The dead had little comfort and little to look forward to unless they had a large surviving family who would make offerings of food and drink to them in perpetuity.

We have already noted that each god had his or her own city in which s/he was thought to live, residing like the earthly ruler in his/her own temple or palace often accompanied by other members of the divine family and with a fully staffed court of officials. Gods were fed, clothed and entertained by their priests as if they had been human kings or queens. The buildings in which these ceremonies took place were of different plans and different sizes, ranging from the great central temples with adjacent stepped zigurats, to small neighborhood chapels. They all have a number of features in common whatever their size; access was limited, the statue of the living god on his or her altar was shielded from the eyes of all but a few priests and senior officials, while major festivals were celebrated in the courtyard of the shrine so that ordinary people might participate in a limited manner. Initially these patron divinities were thought to own all the land and all the people of their city. The temple was the economic hub of the settlement too and the manufacturing industries, trade and agriculture were all centered in it. It was also the administrative center of the city with judicial and welfare functions. It is important to realize that the people of Mesopotamia made no distinction between religious and secular, between church and state; society was seen as a single entity, a concept perhaps closer to that of Islam than of Christianity.

By the end of the third millennium B.C.E. the initially simple agricultural technology of the region had developed into a centralized, state-run system of considerable sophistication, which gave people a far greater degree of control over their environment than ever before, although natural forces could still wreak havoc. Other factors now come into play in the evolution of religious thought, notably changes in the political environment, which saw the first territorial state emerge in the region.
The same period saw another major change in the political environment with the establishment of a dynasty of rulers in the city of Agade and, slightly later, in the ancient southern city of Ur, who declared themselves divine. To bolster their position these self-proclaimed divinities seem to have made a deliberate attempt to transfer power into their own hands at the expense of the old temple institutions thus undermining the power of the priesthood. Changes in the plans of temples, the appearance of shrines in private houses and the occurrence of large numbers of quasi-religious clay plaques in domestic contexts all seem to suggest this. It seems that men and women no longer needed the services of a priest to make an approach to the gods, but did so through the mediation of a personal god or “guardian angel” who becomes of increasing importance. The scene of a man or woman being introduced into the presence of one of the great gods by such a personal god is the most common theme of the glyptic art of the period.

This increasing control over the environment, though far from complete, seems to have made the gods appear less terrifying and less capricious, although their goodwill was never assumed. The texts of the period speak of an assembly of the gods at which major issues were discussed and decisions taken. Perhaps it is this relative rationality among the gods that led to the emergence of the first indications of a concept of a rational judgment of the individual according to his deserts by the gods after death. By extension the notion emerged of personal responsibility among men and women for their actions. It was shortly after this that the texts began to speak of the dilemma presented by the harsh treatment, on occasion, of the so-called just person by the gods, a dilemma exemplified by the story of Job in the Old Testament.

In the course of around four thousand years the people of ancient Mesopotamia seem to have moved from the worship of untamed natural forces to a state-sponsored religion where each person had a personal god or goddess who guarded and guided them through life, procuring favours from the great gods and protecting them from illness and other forms of bad luck. In addition, each individual was increasingly seen as responsible for their own actions to a divine judge whose decision would decide their fate in the afterlife. These major intellectual developments can be correlated with changes in the relationship between humans and their physical and political environment. As human beings’ control of the natural forces, which had originally determined their survival or death, improved, so human beings’ perception of the nature of those forces changed. First they were given human forms and human characteristics, but were seen as capricious and unpredictable; gradually they were seen as more rational; and the pantheon might be said to have begun to grow up by about 2000 B.C.E.

Further Reading
See also: Creation Myths of the Ancient World; Creation Story in the Hebrew Bible; Egypt – Ancient; Greece – Classical; Roman Natural Religion.

Michell, John (1933–)

John Michell is a prolific British writer and artist concerned with what he sees as the recovery and further elaboration of sacred principles of living. He combines interests in, for example, architecture, art, astrology, geomancy, geometry, gematria, music, and numerology with a wide engagement of archeological and historical literature and sites. This is even more impressive when one notes that Michell’s knowledge of geomancy includes traditions and practices originating not only in China (e.g., Fengshui), but also in Europe and elsewhere. Furthermore, his writings arise from and provoke a passionate participation in the present realities and future possibilities of the world. When he writes about Jerusalem, for example, he is deeply concerned not only with ancient architecture, geometry and history, but with something far more than a Middle-East peace settlement. The words “sacred” and “harmony” are leitmotifs in all he has written about humanity, the world and the cosmos.

Since its first publication in 1967, his book The View Over Atlantis has had a significant impact on the study and practise of "Earth Mysteries." Others might map lines (leys) across landscapes and argue about UFOs, ancient civilizations, and Earth energies. Michell proffers a glorious vision of a global civilization that once tapped some enormous but subtle energy and channelled it through a vast astronomically and artistically perfect system to enhance harmony and beauty. The discovery of alignments and the understanding of ancient megalithic sites, for example, are related to a greater purpose than the production of a gazetteer of obscure facts. Michell encourages people to “bring human ways into harmony” with the place and the world in which they live. Science and imagination combine in underscoring a visionary but practical encounter with a nature that is itself the manifestation of perfect and balanced proportions.

Harriet Crawford
His many publications are hard to summarize briefly. But if View over Atlantis is about Earth Mysteries, Twelve Tribe Nations concerns ideal social structures, Euphonics is a sonic and musical primer, Traveller's Guide to Sacred England is a walking tour guide, The Earth Spirit catalogs artistic representations of Earth energies, and his many newspaper and internet articles discuss popular theories about a sacred but damaged world. Even a full list of Michell's publications along these lines would fail to do them or their author justice any more than would describing Michell as a popularizer of Platonic and Pythagorean theories.

Michell's combination of precise measurement, careful argument, impassioned advocacy, and confident eccentricity have probably won him as many admirers as they have lost him credibility in various academic circles. Conversely, perhaps, his advocacy of monarchy and priestly authority may be ignored by those enchanted by the geometrically and artistically pleasing structures he adduces in diverse landscapes and localities. However, a better test of the appeal of Michell's work is that it has influenced both mystics and eco-activists, romantics and pragmatists. It can perhaps be summed up as a continuing quest for the reconciliation of the intrinsic patterns discernible in literally all sensual, material forms, thereby elucidating cosmic principles for harmonious living for all.

Graham Harvey

Further Reading
See also: Earth Mysteries; Geomancy; Lost Worlds; Stone Circles; UFOs and Extraterrestrials.

Middle Earth

The “Middle Earth” is the setting for J.R.R. Tolkien’s (1892–1973) mythopoetic book The Lord of the Rings, as well as his earlier children’s book The Hobbit. It is inhabited by a number of different “races,” only one of which is human. The elves, masters of lore and art, are immortal; dwarves are secretive, hardy and hard-working; and hobbbits, Tolkien’s own unique invention, are a short and sociable people, shrewd if not intellectual. There are also corrupted opposites of the elves and dwarfs – orcs and trolls.

In Tolkien’s tale, Frodo the hobbit comes into possession of a magic ring which turns out to be the One Ring of Power, forged by Sauron, the evil lord of Mordor and the most powerful ruler in Middle Earth. Sauron is looking for his Ring, which would enable him to complete his conquest. So Frodo, accompanied by a Company comprised of two men, an elf, a dwarf, three hobbbits and an Odinic wizard named Gandalf, is obliged to try to take it back to the furnace in Mordor where it was forged, which is the only place it can be destroyed, and which is the only way that harmony can be restored to the Middle Earth. This pursuit constitutes the story of The Lord of the Rings.

Each of the races exists in interdependence with the places where they naturally live: the hobbits in the Shire, with its villages and fields, bounded by woods and streams; the dwarves in the vast heights and depths of the mountains, where they live and mine; and the elves in forests. As one character remarks of the last, “Whether they’ve made the land, or the land’s made them, it’s hard to say . . .” Their relationship is that of living in place – bioregional rather than proprietal. As someone says to Frodo, “all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves.”

Much of Tolkien’s story centers on the struggle of good against evil. Among his most memorable creations are the Ents, who are sentient trees who walk and talk. And when Fangorn, the chief Ent, is asked whose side he is on in the War of the Ring, he replies, “I am not altogether on anybody’s side, because nobody is altogether on my side, if you understand me: nobody cares for the woods as I care for them . . .”

The Ents eventually do go to war against Sauron’s allies. But the natural world in Tolkien’s story has an importance, and a degree of autonomy, that is striking in a modern work. At least sixty-four kinds of non-cultivated plants are mentioned, plus eight of his own invention. Trees especially stand out: not only the four major forests, each with its own particular character, but individual trees as well. As Tolkien noted in a letter late in life, “In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies” (in a letter printed in The Daily Telegraph, 4 July 1972).

Indeed, Middle Earth itself is a kind of character in its own right. Although a secondary creation, Middle Earth is clearly, as Tolkien insisted, our Earth in a different time. One of its roots lies in ancient Northern myth, in which Middle Earth was so called because it hung between the heavens and the underworld, and between the land of ice to the North and the land of fire to the South. The other root was, as Tolkien himself said, “my wonder and delight in the earth as it is, particularly the natural earth” and its weather, geology, ecology, flora and fauna, stars and lunar phases (in Resnik 1967: 41).

As befits a character, Middle Earth is capable of intelligence and emotion. A mountain causes blizzards to block the Company’s way; when a king dies, a great rain weeps.
on the battlefield; and the summer following royal nuptials is unsurpassed for its fecundity. In short, it is a pre-modern animistic and pagan world, where personality and agency is not reserved for humanity alone, and the Earth is alive. Tolkien does not romanticize nature; much of Middle Earth is dangerously hard or hostile, and tragic in its history. But the only place which is dead, or nearly so, and where the land is ruthlessly subdued to industrial production, is Mordor.

By the same token, the natural world in Middle Earth is not divorced from religion. There is no organized religion there as such, but the worship that takes place is of deities that are coeval with elemental powers and natural phenomena (stars, trees, etc.). And its continuity, in Tolkien’s world, depends on narratives: the collective, ritualized stories of divine, human and nonhuman beings that constitute myth.

For Tolkien himself, this aspect of his work presented certain problems; it existed in complex tension with his deep personal commitment to Roman Catholicism. On the one hand, the latter’s tolerance of intermediary spirits (unlike Protestantism) permitted him to draw on the pagan mythology he also loved. And this has ethical implications, for example, reflected in Frodo’s experience of the intrinsic value of a tree in the Elvish forest of Lorien: “He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself.” On the other hand, Christian theism insists on the ultimate dominance of the one transcendent God, and there is a corresponding Christian stewardship ethic in the hobbit Sam’s responsibility for renewing the post-war Shire.

Readers have responded to Tolkien’s work in diverse ways, shaped by their own time. Since the 1970s – a time of global ecological crisis – the story is increasingly appropriated as an environmental story. As Fangorn puts it, “it seems that the wind is setting East, and the withering of all woods may be drawing near.” And at the center of that storm is the Ring of Power, which some readers liken to technological society and what Lewis Mumford called “the megamachine” (Mumford 1964: 263).

More specifically, the The Lord of the Rings was an inspirational book for the late David McTaggart, founder of Greenpeace. It circulated widely in samizdat form among the underground resistance (environmental as well as political) in the USSR and communist Central Europe. And it has become a part of the green spirituality of radical environmentalists in the United States fighting deforestation who took Fangorn as a symbol of their biocentrism, and in Britain, among activists resisting the imposition of new roads. Tolkien’s work is thus a modern myth about a world not yet disenchanted and commodified, and it tells the story of how that world was saved. In apparently looking back to a lost world, it offers readers hope for this one through what Fraser Harrison termed “radical nostalgia” (1984: 170). As a significant cultural contribution to a much-needed re-enchantment of the world, Tolkien’s Middle Earth has never been more relevant, and new generations of appreciative readers – and as of the early twentieth century, motion picture aficionados as well – will continue to find inspiration there.

Patrick Curry

Further Reading
See also: Disney; Disney Worlds at War; Dragon Environmental Network (United Kingdom); Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Fantasy Literature; Greenpeace; Motion Pictures; Paganism (various).

Minakata, Kumagusu (1867–1941)

Kumagusu Minakata was called “a neglected Japanese genius” by Carmen Blacker, a specialist in Japanese shamanism, in her Presidential Address to the Folklore Society in England in 1982. Born a year before the initiation of the Meiji Period, Minakata became an exemplar of the Meiji renaissance intellectual, traveling to the United States and England as a young man, educating himself in a variety of subjects, and writing articles in Japanese and English on biology, folklore, ethnology, psychology, and religion. He is receiving renewed attention today in Japan particularly because of his “Anti-Amalgamation of Shrines Movement,” according to Sadamichi Kato.

In his opposition to two laws passed by the Meiji government, the first in 1888 and the second in 1906, which first attempted to consolidate villages into larger political units and then sought to limit official religious shrines to one per political unit, Minakata formulated his arguments by melding together ecological and religious arguments. In so
doing, he sought to uphold vernacular spiritual practices in opposition to centralized religion and to defend the local shrines and their surrounding woods as places that not only generated a reverential attitude toward nature, but also supported local flora and fauna on sacred ground and provided a focal point for community self-regulation. True to his localist emphasis, Minakata fought for the preservation of specific shrines, such as the Oyama Shrine to which his family was historically attached, and was jailed at one point for his protests. In 1920 the Japanese government abandoned the contested ordinances. Although none of Minakata’s writings have been translated into English, volume ten and the appendix to volume one of Minakata Kumagusu Zenshu do contain English-language pieces that he authored.

Patrick D. Murphy

Further Reading
See also: Japanese Religions.

Mitchell, Elyne (1913–2002)

A poetically descriptive essayist on environmental issues, Sibyl Elyne Keith Mitchell (born Melbourne, Australia; daughter to Sir Harry Chauvel) was the first Australian to place the condition of her country’s soil in the context of comparative civilization and ecology. Most of her life was spent on a station in the upper reaches of the Murray River, in southernmost New South Wales. While writing more aesthetically oriented works – *Australia’s Alps* (1942), *Speak to the Earth* (1945), and *Images in Water* (1947) – her most famous work is on the need to preserve ecological balance. In *Soil and Civilization* (1946) she plots the paths of civilization away from an earlier ecological unity and a spiritual awareness that the whole of life rested in God. The same error of neglecting this unity, and showing irresponsibility toward the soil above all, brought trouble to Sumeria, Persia, Egypt, China and India, Greece and Rome, Western Europe, and the Mayas, with Westerners repeating the same errors in the Americas and South Africa. Her prophetic goal was to save a vulnerable Australia from the same fate, by (re-)extolling the soil as the divinely ordained matrix of our being, which has to be rebuilt, where damaged, with patient research and wise water conservation. Supporting images from the world of comparative religion are prolific, if more often than not utilized as rather poetic invocations.

Garry W. Trompf

Further Reading

Miwok People

Miwok (alternatively Miwuk, Mewuk, and Me-wan) is a modern designation which groups innumerable small nations of California Indians according to broad-based linguistic and cultural similarities. The Miwokan subgroup of the Utian language family (Penutian stock) consists of seven such cultural nationalities: Coast, Lake, Bay, Plains, Northern Sierra, Central Sierra, and Southern Sierra Miwok. While these categories provide a useful comparative framework, for most of their history Miwok peoples lived as members of independent, relatively egalitarian, multi-village tribes, each one with distinct territorial boundaries and control of the resources within those territories. The landscapes Miwok peoples inhabited varied from coastal baylands and inland hills to higher-elevation foothills and mountains in the Sierra Nevada.

Today, eleven federally recognized tribes have Miwok membership; others are still seeking federal recognition.

For Miwok peoples, nature, culture, and religion did not exist as separate categories, but as blended elements of day-to-day life. As the underpinning of Miwok religious systems, creation narratives provided people with a sense of identity, rules of appropriate behavior and a context for evaluating life’s most meaningful experiences. They described the actions of the “First People,” supernatural personages with both human and animal attributes, and, at times, the attributes of natural phenomenon, such as stars and hail. The Miwok refer to the First People by the names of the present-day animals and natural phenomenon into which they transformed themselves after they created humans and provided “everything, everywhere” humans would need to live. Miwok narratives describe how the First People created human beings from crow, goose, raven, and turkey vulture feathers placed on or planted into the ground, or from wood and mud. One contemporary Bodega Miwok/Dry Creek Pomo woman sees the creation from feathers as confirmation that humans comprise “both earth and a spirit that soars” (Kathleen Smith, personal communication, 2002).
As a gift of the First People, the animals of today serve as a tangible reminder of myth-time, and Miwok cultures and spiritual values incorporated proscriptions for the responsible, respectful use of those same animals. According to Central, Northern, Southern and Coast Miwok sacred narratives, the very shape of people’s hands was an outcome of the wise foresight of a Lizard personage. Northern, Central, Coast and Lake Miwok peoples variously attributed the red breast of robins, red throat of hummingbirds, and the ability to make fire from buckeye and incense cedar, as an outcome of the theft of fire by Robin and Hummingbird personages in myth-time, when they brought heat and light to an otherwise cold and dark world. Mount Diablo, Mount Konocti, Sonoma Peak, and the sites of other events during myth-time, all served as awe-inspiring reminders of creation, and became places of prayer and sources of spiritual power.

As with many other North American Indians, the birth imagery of a world flood permeates the creation narratives of the Southern, Central, and Coast Miwok. In Sierra Miwok versions, Frog, Hummingbird, and Dove, all male personages, obtain sand and mud from which to create (re-birth) the flooded world. Dundes (1984) has conducted a comparative study of psycho-symbolic elements of this distinctly male creation, which has cognates in several parts of the world.

Another mythic event that interconnected nature, culture, and religion among the Miwok featured a world fire. The Miwok were well aware of the regenerative qualities of fire, which they used as a horticultural tool, in a carefully managed way, to return nutrients to the soil, eliminate disease organisms from it, improve seed harvests, and bring about the growth of young, herbaceous plant material which provided browse for deer, elk and antelope, which they in turn used for food, clothing and tools. Regular burning caused the growth of long, straight shoots needed to make shapely baskets and a variety of other objects. It also eliminated the accumulation of fuel in the form of decaying plant material and other plant debris on the ground, thereby preventing the occurrence of the type of uncontrolled, destructive fire which spread across the world in myth-time.

Not only did the Miwok manage the land in a way that acknowledged their relationship with it and their responsibility to it, but they also ascribed consciousness to inanimate objects, as well as plants and animals. They viewed the world as comprised of an interconnected system of powerful, usually ambivalent, supernatural forces, including spirits associated with air, wind, and water, ghosts, and other beings, which existed as an integral part of daily experience. The world had the potential for both good and bad – not necessarily in the moral or ethical sense of right and wrong, but as an expression of harmonious and inharmonious elements. These component forces were good (in harmony) when under control, but had the potential for bad (illness or catastrophe) if uncontrolled.

Supernatural sanctions, ritual, ceremony, and cultural rules served to control and stabilize a potentially unstable world. They provided an affirmation of, and check on, natural forces. So it was that Miwok peoples kept the world harmonious (balanced) through prayerful thoughts, actions, and offerings, adherence to rules of proper behavior, fasting, and the observance of spiritual dances on a seasonal cycle.

The most sacred dances, as visual prayers, gave thanks to the Creator and served to maintain the world’s spiritual balance, thereby ensuring the health and well-being of the group, protecting people from natural disasters, and creating the conditions necessary for an abundant harvest. The Miwok also held less sacred dances for doctoring, to dedicate and give thanks for the autumn acorn harvest, to initiate economic activities appropriate to a given time of year, to commemorate important events, and for mourning.

Throughout north-central California a roundhouse served as the center of religious observances. The earliest roundhouses were semi-subterranean, earth-covered structures supported by posts and secondary rafters, their shape reminiscent of the Miwok conception of the cosmos as a sky dome resting on the Earth; their central smoke-hole reminiscent of an opening, recognized by at least some Miwok, as existing at the top of the sky dome. Beyond this dome, and below the Earth, supernatural beings existed who conducted activities which affected the Miwok, such as creating earthquakes and moving the sun from east to west. The womb-like darkness and tunneled entrances of roundhouses evidence birth symbolism.

The roundhouse provided the locale for the observance of the Kuksu religious system, a system shared by people in the San Francisco Bay area, the Sacramento and northern San Joaquin Valleys, and adjacent hill areas.

Kuksu observances were characterized by a male secret society and, at times, a similar female secret society. The society members were chosen on the basis of their social, political or economic status. They underwent formal initiation rites and special instruction before receiving leadership positions. In their role as religious specialists, initiates administered the cycle of Kuksu ceremonies, which included singing, dancing, and curing. Through ritual observances, the dancers “recreated sacred time and in one way or another restored their people to the unsullied state that had prevailed at the time of creation” (Bean and Vane 1978: 665). In the most important and elaborate ceremonies, dancers represented supernatural spirits and beings, often the same as those prominent in creation accounts. The words of a Central Sierra Miwok lileusi dance expresses well the transformation from human to spirit that the dancers undergo: “This is what he [the spirit] said when he came. He came from Mt. Diablo.
The dancers get just like this fellow when they start to be this kind of a dancer" (Gifford 1955: 277). In undergoing this transformation, the dancers accepted tremendous responsibility. They adhered to stringent rules lest illness or catastrophe result from improper conduct of the dances.

The dancers wore elegant feathered regalia, comprised of flicker quill headbands, hairnets, headdresses, hairpins, belts, earrings and cloaks, which served as "a symbol of great wealth and prestige" (Bates 1982: 1). Because of the intense supernatural power associated with the dance and regalia, the latter had to be properly produced, manufactured, handled, and cared for. The makers sang special songs and made food offerings. Construction details, such as feather arrangements, showed the maker's respect for the birds from which they come. The finest examples demonstrated the tremendous technical ability and care needed to trim, cut, and secure the materials for a grand appearance. During the ceremonies, the actions of the dancers, the light reflecting against their regalia in the otherwise dark roundhouse, the sounds of shell pendants and beads moving with their rhythmic steps, and the voices of the singers, accompanied by whistles, split-stick rattles, and a footdrum, all helped to properly transport the dancers and audience into the spiritual realm, and provided a visible affirmation of their day-to-day relationship with nature and the supernatural.

Spanish, Mexican, Russian and American intrusions onto Miwok lands irrevocably altered that relationship. Miwok peoples variously grappled with missionization, introduced disease, enforced servitude, displacement, massacres, separation in boarding schools, and social marginalization, at the same time that trapping, building, mining, logging, ranching, agriculture, and the elimination of Miwok land-management practices caused rapid environmental deterioration. The Miwok economy shifted from one based on foraging and horticultural techniques, to one based on a cash economy. Many Miwok converted to Christian religions, seeing elements of the older beliefs in the new religions. Where the older religious systems continued to be practiced, they underwent changes due to the implementation of the prophesies, visions, and dreams of new religious leaders, and the new and closer contracts established between tribes in wider geographical areas than the past. Some of this change may have been generated by the spread of the Ghost Dance movement into north-central California in 1870, with its hope for a return to the "peaceful and prosperous conditions" that existed prior to non-Indian intrusion.

Those Miwok who continued to dance began substituting cloth, buttons, glass beads, yarn, commercial cordage, and non-native feathers for some of the harder to obtain and make materials used in the older regalia, especially the raptor feathers of old, which the federal government, in an effort to prevent extinctions, made illegal to possess, except by special permit. Although many old-time traditions had declined or fallen into disuse by the early 1900s, some Miwok people fought to keep the dances going. Notable among these efforts was that of the late Bill Franklin, who, in the 1940s collaborated with Sierra Miwok and Nisenan traditionalists to form what is now called the Miwuk Dance Group. Franklin also helped establish Chaw' se (Indian Grinding Rock State Park), where a roundhouse was established, and an annual big time, which brings together several Central California Indian dance groups, occurs. He was also instrumental in the establishment of a Miwuk Indian Roundhouse at Westpoint.

Some Coast Miwok dance with their Pomo relatives in a roundhouse established at Point Reyes National Seashore. Other Miwok people participate in dances at a roundhouse built at Yosemite National Park, where old-style ceremonies are hosted as well as an annual Bear Dance, a new tradition borrowed from the Mountain Maidu. Whether public or private, such dances provide an affirmation of Miwok peoples determination to ensure the health and well-being of their people and culture into the future.

Some of the older values and beliefs which bound nature, culture and religion together in Miwok life have undergone a renaissance in other areas as well. Those Miwok who continue to gather some of the native foods, such as acorn and manzanita, and natural materials from which to make cultural objects, such as basketry, still pray and leave offerings when they do. Miwok and other baskettakers are actively working with officials associated with National Forests and other public and private landholders to urge the discontinuation of herbicide spraying, ensure access to native foods and materials, and seek the reintroduction of native plants and ancient land-management techniques, especially burning. Contemporary Miwok peoples also seek protection of their sacred sites.

Beverly Ortiz

Further Reading


See also: Harmony in Native North America; Holy Land in Native North America; Mother Earth; Muir, John; National Parks and Monuments (United States); Sacred Geography in Native North America; Sierra Club; Spirit of Sage Council; Wilderness Religion.

Miyazawa, Kenji (1896–1933)

Kenji Miyazawa was a Japanese agronomist, poet, and writer. Through his writing we see how the knowledge of the scientist, the intuition of the poet, and the Buddhist’s sense of compassion as well as understanding of the interdependence of all phenomena, can nurture attitudes rooted in “deep ecology” and promote the growth of a bioregional consciousness. Miyazawa’s collected works include poems, songs, plays and tales (dowa). Although dowa refer to children’s tales, his stories have earned international recognition as literary masterpieces, offering multiple levels of interpretation.

Miyazawa grew up in a struggling agricultural community in Iwate Prefecture, about 300 miles north of Tokyo. At age eighteen he embraced the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, a doctrine of co-enlightenment that preaches the essential unity of all phenomena over time and space, offering hope for Buddhahood to all, regardless of species or gender. Miyazawa was deeply influenced by this sutra, which calls upon the reader to act out the sutra with his or her body and mind, following the example of the various bodhisattvas who are prepared to come to the aid of all beings, whether man or woman, human or nonhuman.

Miyazawa studied at Morioka College of Agriculture in order to share his knowledge with local farmers. He also taught at an agricultural high school. During breaks from regular work in class and field, Kenji would lead his students up the volcanic slopes of Mt. Iwate, or take them to the local riverbed to dig for fossils. As they walked, he would tell them about the relationships over space and time between rocks, soil, plants, and animals. He was a pioneer of environmental education.

Although Miyazawa devoted his life to the local farm community, he was saddened to see wild lands destroyed for further development. In his poem “A Recitative on Irises by a Young Surveyor from the Land Cultivation Bureau,” our surveyor decries as “original sin” the destruction of a lovely green highland with its dense clusters of irises, soon to be plowed under and converted to dreary humus (Miyazawa 1980: v.5, 198–200).

From early childhood Miyazawa enjoyed hiking over the plains and into the mountains of Iwate. His joy, bordering on ecstasy, is expressed in “Ippongi no” (One-tree Plain):

I am the beloved of forest and field.
When I walk through rustling reeds
Green messages, bashfully folded,
Slip into my pockets;
When I enter the shade of the woods,
Crescent-shaped lipmarks
Cover my elbows and trousers (Miyazawa 1980: v.2, 260–2).
In “Taneyama Heights,” the poet goes beyond rapport to complete identification with nature, as he looks out from a high plateau, over layers of mountain ridges: “I am the water and the light and the wind” (Miyazawa 1980: v. 3, 419). In contrast to the traditional literary view that sought to bring external nature into one’s spiritual universe and internalize it – the so-called "miniature garden tendency" – we find that Miyazawa’s inner world flows outward, merging with the universe.

Rooting his poems and stories in the landscape of Iwate Prefecture, Miyazawa provides the intimacy necessary to establish a sense of place, while simultaneously transcending time and space, to supply the modern myths that will reconnect us to the Earth. Themes characterizing Miyazawa’s tales are the virtues of humility, the equality of all phenomena, harmonious coexistence, balance and compromise, the aesthetics of untamed nature, and science that benefits life. Many tales illustrate the cyclical nature of natural systems, and at the same time explore the deeper philosophical issues of karma and cycles of life and death. Miyazawa’s tales seem to convey “the will of the universe” as expressed to the poet through the sounds of nature, particularly the voice of the wind. Miyazawa, as artist, is a modern-day shaman, interpreting the divinity in nature. Miyazawa, as scientist, brings to us a detailed view of a local ecosystem. His words unfold as an ecology of sacred space.

If Miyazawa Kenji has become an almost mythical figure in contemporary Japan, it is because he has provided through both his literary work and lifestyle some of the guidelines that could help us create a better world. As the child Giovanni says in Miyazawa’s Night of the Milky Way Railroad, “. . . we’ve got to create a better place than heaven, right here” (Miyazawa 1980: v.12, 152).

Karen Colligan-Taylor

Further Reading

See also: Buddhism – East Asia; Deep Ecology; Japanese Love of Nature; Japanese Religions; Sacred Space/Place.

Moltmann, Jürgen (1926–)

Jürgen Moltmann is widely regarded as the foremost Protestant theologian of the last forty years. Moltmann was a professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen from 1967 until 1994. He was an early proponent of “political theology” which stresses the Church’s public mission to promote social justice. His first major book, the Theology of Hope (1964), won wide acclaim for its forceful affirmation that an eschatological “openness to the future” must be at the core of Christian proclamation. This openness, he argued, sustains hope for liberation and societal transformation. In The Crucified God (1973), Moltmann secured his international stature by developing a “theology of the cross” that understands the inbreaking of the future of God’s kingdom in the midst of Christ’s and the world’s suffering. In the mid-1970s he began to introduce ecological concerns into his theological reflection. In The Future of Creation (1979) he sought to integrate his eschatological emphasis on history with an ecological understanding of the natural world. He described creation as a “still open, creative process” in which God enlivens and sustains the community of life. Instead of the biblical charge to “subdue the earth,” Moltmann holds we must “free the earth through fellowship with it” (Moltmann 1979: 119, 129).

In 1980 Moltmann began to publish a major series in systematic theology titled Messianic Theology. His second volume, God in Creation (1985), developed his integration of eschatological transformation with an ecologically informed theology of creation. Moltmann is a broadly ecumenical thinker and he developed his views in close conversation with Jewish, Catholic, and Orthodox sources as well as ones drawn from the Protestant traditions. Moltmann stressed the role of the Holy Spirit dwelling in, and sustaining, the world of creation. He understood creation as being transformed by the kingdom of God that renews all things. He concluded, too, that genuine human liberation requires living in peace with nature. Against Western anthropocentric traditions, Moltmann called for a theocentric view that understands the natural world as God’s creation, not as mere property subject to any human use. Moltmann drew on the Jewish kabbalistic doctrine of the zimzum that holds that God first created space for the world of natural creation by withdrawing into him or herself. For Moltmann, this notion of divine self-limitation reminds us helpfully that God creates in major part “by letting-be, by making room” (Moltmann 1985: 86–8). Rejecting Christianity’s long-standing view that the human is the “crown of creation,” Moltmann followed the...
Jewish belief that the Sabbath is creation’s true crown (Moltmann 1985: 31). The Sabbath is a “feast of creation” for it marks God’s resting with, and immanent presence within, the natural world, and it suggests to Moltmann that the path of ecological responsibility lies in an ethic of dwelling within and respecting creation, rather than one of mastery and domination.

While Moltmann’s views on creation have been generally applauded, some fear that he pushes an eschatological sense of nature’s “openness” too far. They worry that his description of creation as an “open system” might unwittingly play into the hands of those who lose no sleep over the onrush of humanity’s transformation of nature. If nature is so “open,” are there then no stable balances, ordered relationships, or relatively fixed requirements for species flourishing that must not be transgressed? Despite such concerns, Moltmann deserves recognition for his important contribution in developing an ecological theology of creation. Many theologians and lay-people, who had before dismissed ecological concerns as marginal ones for the Christian churches, have come to a new appreciation of their significance under Moltmann’s prodding. Moltmann’s international stature allowed him to draw the attention of a wide range of theologians and lay-people to ecological concerns in a way that few other theologians were able to do.

William French

Further Reading


See also: Christianity (7b) – Political Theology; Christianity (7c) – Liberation Theology; Christianity (7d) – Feminist Theology.
the taimen is also called the river wolf by the fly-fishing community.

Mongolia’s Uur River Valley, one of the most isolated and pristine in Eurasia, attracted the shaman Dayan Derkh to live on the banks of its cold waters during the thirteenth century. It was here, as legend has it, that the feisty shaman got crossways with Genghis Khan and turned himself to stone to escape the Khan’s wrath. Vexed by his behavior, the great Khan called upon the Dalai Lama in Tibet to deal with this stubborn stone. The Dalai Lama sent over seven monks to build a Buddhist monastery under the shaman’s cave. It was while listening to the monks’ prayers that Dayan Derkh converted to Buddhism. The monastery became a school housing 150 monks and taught a thousand students before it was destroyed.

In 1937, under the influence of Russia’s leader Joseph Stalin, the Mongolian government slaughtered more than 17,000 monks in Mongolia. (No records are available and some reports indicate as many as 200,000 were killed.) Dayan Derkh monastery was locked and the Uur Valley was left without spiritual leadership. After three generations, the residents’ beliefs began to blur and lose power. The monastery was looted and torn down. Today, all that is left are the weathered foundation posts tied with blue ribbons, leaning beside scattered piles of gifts left for Dayan Derkh and Buddha.

Like many resource-rich habitats, the Uur Valley is experiencing overhunting, timber and mineral extraction and habitat destruction. Taimen are poached and sold in regional markets to urbanites and foreigners. It is illegal to kill taimen and this trend in poaching is a modern issue. Residents once guided by the regional religious beliefs, which considered the fish the river god’s daughter, left the taimen unharmed. Eating fish in this culture remains taboo. Nevertheless, in recent years, the river god’s daughters have felt the pressure of poaching.

In 1998, Jeff and Dan Vermillion, brothers from Livingston, Montana, opened up catch-and-release fly fishing in this region and in conjunction with the Mongolian government, hired local men to patrol the river and issue citations. The fine for poaching taimen, however, was less than what the taimen sell for and the poaching patrol failed. Vermillion, who has a vested interest in keeping the taimen fishery healthy, undertook a grant with the Taimen Conservation Fund to fund a team of aquatic scientists to study and make conservation recommendations for the Uur fishery.

The aquatic research component was only half of the envisioned project. Vermillion wants to work with the Khambo Lama, Mongolia’s head lama. As scientists conduct fish counts to establish data sets and create conservation management recommendations, the Buddhist monastery restoration can help to restore cultural perceptions of the environment. Every resident I spoke with was excited about the restoration of Dayan Derkh. It served for centuries as an important cultural and spiritual center. Despite the fact that the monastery was destroyed, the site is still a very vital place in this valley.

Construction on the monastery began in 2004, the aquatic research in 2003. Plans are underway for an educational film, narrated in the Mongolian language, on taimen poaching. Meanwhile, Buddhist leaders are helping to develop the message and a regionwide outreach plan. As the project advances I will track shifting attitudes, changes in poaching practices, and taimen population recovery.

At a time when religion is fueling hatred elsewhere in the world, can religion, religious texts and dogma help humans better connect and care for their Earth? As a conservationist, I have worked for years looking for opportunities to encourage local investment in the protection of natural resources. I think exploring the marriage of Buddhist ecological thought and conservation in Mongolia could provide a promising example that could spawn many such efforts in the future.

Betsy Gaines

Further Reading
See also: Bon (Tibet); Buddhism – Engaged; Buddhism – Tibetan; Fly Fishing; Tibet and Central Asia; Yunnan Region (Southwest China and Montane Mainland Southeast Asia).

Mora, Pat (1942–)

Pat Mora, a native of El Paso, Texas, first established herself as a poet, then as an author of children’s books, and, more recently, of essays and a memoir. Nicolás Kanellos has claimed that she has one of the widest audiences of any Hispanic poet in the U.S. Kanellos, Anya Achtenberg, and other critics have noted that Mora’s poetic voice
exudes a tone and spirit of healing. Such healing is both physical and spiritual and repeatedly is tied to a healthy relationship between people and place, culture and environment. Throughout her work, whether writing for children or adults, she integrates place, spirit, and personal development, into an intertwining process of achieving wholeness. The southwestern landscape, the environment of her own life and her heritage, as a particular aspect of the natural world is represented not only as life-giving but also as alive. Thus, Kanellos speaks of Mora’s interest in shamanism specifically referring to Mora’s interest in and depiction of curanderos/curanderas, herbal and spiritual healers. It also includes her less frequent depiction of the brujas, witch. This attention comes out clearly in poems in her first three books, Chants, Borders, and Communion, in which to a large extent the Southwest remains not only the primary setting but also the primary subject of individual pieces.

Before publishing another volume of poetry, Mora brought out Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle. In these short pieces, she relates her strong sense of a living, spiritually informing nature to her mestizaje, her mixed ethnic heritage, with particular emphasis on the native side of that heritage. She clarifies that, for her, conserving natural diversity and conserving cultural diversity go hand in hand. She explores these notions further in her next book of poetry, Agua Santa: Holy Water. Playing on the clear allusion to the Catholic heritage of most Mexican Americans, Mora immediately links this sacred water to its earthly origins, including amniotic fluid, in the first two sections of the book titled “Old Sea” and “Rivers.” Inverting the anti-body, anti-sensuality stereotypes promoted by patriarchal tradition she celebrates the embodied spirituality of mother–daughter relationships. In the process she links together all of the religious traditions of her heritage invoking various goddesses along the way. While the “pagan” predominates in Agua Santa, a vernacular Catholicism is humorously and lovingly portrayed in her most recent poetry collection, Aunt Carmen’s Book of Practical Saints, which is lavishly illustrated. These illustrations link her poems to the popular Northern New Mexico village tradition of saint carving. In the same year that Practical Saints appeared, 1997, Mora also published House of Houses, a family memoir, in which die dead and the living intermingle and share the space of the family homestead. Memory, cultural preservation, spirituality, and healing are all blended in this loving tribute in which every day is treated like The Day of the Dead.

Patrick D. Murphy

Further Reading

See also: Autobiography; Animism; Memoir and Nature Writing; Shamanism (various).

Moro Movement (Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands)

The Moro Movement of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, is a custom (kastom) movement that promotes a traditional way of life instead of embracing mission ways or modernization. The age of the movement’s founder, the famed Moro, is not known, but he is a man long respected across the whole Guadalcanal community. He worked as a carrier for the Americans during and after World War II, in a conflict that had profound social consequences for islanders throughout the Pacific. In 1957, he initiated his movement after a spiritual experience. As he has put it:

One day I got sick and died at six in the morning. The village cried for me and began preparing my funeral. In the evening my heart started to beat again. As I became conscious again I had a vision: I had to take my people back to a traditional way of life – especially clothing, houses, fishing and gardens (author interview).

Children are taught both the custom values attached to the Movement while also attending traditional school classes like the rest of the country. There are several Christian churches within the area and people are free to practice. There is no conflict between Christianity and Moro’s followers. Moro expressed the platform of the movement and its environmentalist implications in 2000:

Before Jesus there were spirits of land and sea and forbidden (tambu) places. Missionaries destroyed our totems and dispelled bad spirits. People accepted it mostly and now believe their life is a mix of Christianity and traditional life. We are not devil people. We don’t worship any bad spirits. We are Christians but we want to keep our traditional way of life. This means no development or spoiling of our environment. The trees and gardens and rivers give us life and we must keep them. The land is our mother . . . our life . . . our future (conversation with author).
Guadalcanal, like many Melanesian societies, is matrilineal – the women are the traditional landowners. To visit the 8000 people who live under Moro’s influence in a string of villages along the southern Weathercoast of Guadalcanal, is to glimpse a people who have effectively rejected the Cargo or modern commodities of the modern world and who seek a Kastom way of life. The men wear a bark loincloth called a kabilato and spend their days fishing and building canoes and huts. The women wear only grass skirts and work in the sweet potato gardens and raise children. Among the few concessions to modern technology are some fiberglass banana boats with outboard engines, solar-powered radios at home, and blackboards.

For Moro and his followers, the relationship between nature and themselves is a holistic one and not divided into the worship of particular animals, plants or nature spirits. Their concern is for the preservation of their natural environment which is in some ways linked to the preservation of a harmonious society. The movement’s relative isolation helps to reinforce this. Moro was clearly affected by the battles of Guadalcanal during the Second World War. The killing machines which destroyed human beings and nature may well have influenced Moro’s vision effectively to disengage from the modern world and rely on the certainties of a kastom life and the sanctity of nature. The movement has recently become embroiled in the two-year civil war on Guadalcanal. Moro claims that he never supported the Guadalcanal militants who began evicting Malaitan and other squatters from around the capital Honiara in 1998, which triggered the war and claimed at least 100 lives. An uneasy truce is currently holding, with peacekeeping forces from Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji monitoring a ceasefire. But several attacks by the rival Malaitan Eagle Force, who successfully launched a coup there in May 2000 against Moro and those villages loyal to him, have marked Moro as the “spiritual leader” of the Guadalcanal militants and thus his movement remains under threat.

Ben Bohane

Further Reading
See also: Bougainville (Papua New Guinea); Melanesian Traditions.

Mother Earth

The existence of an American Mother Earth, the bountiful giver of life, seems common knowledge. As the nurturing sustainer of American Indian communities and individuals, as a reference within ordinary language, as a trope in advertising and popular culture, as a motivating symbol in the public discourse of environmental groups, and as the subject of commentary in scholarly publications – in more forms than might be readily traced, recognition of Mother Earth’s influence seems nearly universal. Following the publication of University of Colorado professor Sam Gill’s Mother Earth: An American Story in 1987, however, common knowledge was attacked, defended and reformulated in ways that have subsequently affected the study of religion and nature in native North America.

Consider perhaps the single most widely spread image of Mother Earth, the globally televised opening ceremony of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah. Drum circles representing Utah’s five native nations, drumming what the announcer explained as the “heartbeat of Mother Earth,” and accompanying music composed by Canadian Mohawk rock musician Robbie Robertson merged into the Olympic symbol (Frost 2003). Gill would claim that the satellite-conveyed unity of the Olympic Mother Earth bears little to no relation to the traditional beliefs and practices of any American native culture. Instead, Mother Earth only came into the worldviews of American Indians during the nineteenth century as they responded to the expansion of white society across their homelands.

In order to grasp Mother Earth’s historical status, Gill argues against reading her numerous contemporary references back into the past, and for explaining any apparently earlier reference in terms of its own original source and context. In performing the kind of “source-criticism” familiar to biblical scholars, Gill winds up claiming that the entire body of ethnographic literature is invalid evidence, since the assumptions regarding Mother Earth in that literature are themselves based on only a few historical accounts. Of these, the two most common are attributed to the Shawnee political and military leader, Tecumseh, and the Wanapum prophetic figure Smohalla.

Tecumseh, in an 1810 meeting with General – and later U.S. President – William Henry Harrison to discuss settlement of Wabash River lands, made the statement: “The Earth is my mother – and on her bosom I will repose.” Except that Gill claims he probably did not, since the earliest accounts of their meeting at Vincennes (Indiana), including Harrison’s diary, make no mention of Tecumseh’s words. Instead, the quote proliferated rapidly following the 1825 publication of Henry Ward Schoolcraft’s Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley. For Gill, the historical record shows that even if Tecumseh spoke these words, they cannot be evidence of native
belief in a Mother Earth goddess, since the earliest texts making use of them do so to remark on Tecumseh’s heroic character, or even merely to describe the seating arrangements at his tense meeting with Harrison. Gill insists that at best Tecumseh’s language was metaphorical and strategic – deployed in an effort to deflect American designs on native land – not theological.

The paucity of historical documentation, Gill also claims, calls into question the scholarship of mainstream figures in the history of religion. Figures such as E.B. Tylor, Mircea Eliade and Ake Hultkrantz, each drew broad conclusions about American Indian religions from the single statements of Tecumseh or Smohalla – whose “shall I take a knife and tear my mother’s bosom?” suffers from the same flimsy documentary pedigree as Tecumseh’s statement, while also being derivative in its Victorian euphemism. Accordingly, such pronouncements as Eliade’s that the “emotions that we feel when we hear (Smohalla’s words) is our response to what they evoke with their wonderful freshness and spontaneity – the primordial image of the Earth-Mother” (in Gill 1987: 116) reflect far more about the theoretical desires and cultural needs of twentieth-century intellectuals than they do of the traditional worldviews of native North Americans.

Contemporary cultural needs, Gill claims, have also encouraged American Indians to embrace Mother Earth language in their efforts to maintain their distinctive cultural and personal identities over against the assimilationist influence of the dominant culture, and to provide symbolic capital in their ongoing political struggles. As Gill considers recent Indian references to Mother Earth, he is most struck by the ways in which she “is identified with the most fundamental concerns of all Indian peoples, the retention of lands” (Gill 1987: 147–8). She is thus, he thinks, a crucial contemporary symbol for pan-tribal concerns. He suspects, however, that this same broad-based sense of Indian-ness formed around Mother Earth serves the countercultural needs of many within the dominant culture today; just as, he argues, it served the needs of earlier generations of Americans in helping to form their own national identity. Mother Earth “expresses the civilizing, building, transforming aspects of Americans. Yet it also permits expression of the male, conquering, destructive, defiling aspects of the American character” (Gill 1987: 155).

Reaction to Gill’s book, which he himself saw as “heretical” (Gill 1987: 156), was sharp. Several scholarly reviews were quite critical. Jordan Paper noted the widespread reference in Latin America among Amazon Basin tribes to Mother Earth figures, and in Peru to “Pachamama” – citing sixteenth-century Spanish sources to that effect – as well as telling linguistic and archeological evidence from Great Lakes Algonquians and other tribes (Paper 1990: 5, 14). Dan Merkur found Gill’s work marred by a logical flaw – in concluding that an absence of evidence is evidence of absence – and therefore irrelevant (Merkur 1993: 178), and also noted the widespread distribution among the Inuit of a figure conforming to Gill’s expectations of Mother Earth. J. Baird Callicott found Gill employing the same sort of archetypal category of interpretation, “goddess,” that Gill found Tylor, Eliade, Hultkrantz and other “top-down” historians of religion imposing on their test cultures (Callicott 1989: 317).

More intense was the reaction among American Indian readers. The most heated came from Ward Churchill, Gill’s colleague at the University of Colorado and a member of the American Indian Movement, whose criticism appeared in several forums in the years following the book’s publication. As had other scholars, Churchill faulted Gill for arguing against a “straw man” (Churchill 1998: 110), and – more than most – attacked his reading of the historical evidence. For Churchill, the “obvious conclusion to be drawn” from Gill’s source reading “is that so many people refer to the Tecumseh statement for the simple reason that this is what the man said” (Churchill 1998: 113).

While disagreements in reading strategies might be glossed as “merely academic,” what set Churchill’s reaction apart from other reviews was his explanation for Gill’s historical treatment of Mother Earth. Gill’s problem is not simply one of faulty reasoning from evidence to claim, but rather of intent. Churchill sees in Gill, and in a variety of New Age and environmentalist appropriations of Indian religious traditions popular at the time, the same historical revisionist ideology that animates “the sordid neonazi [sic] sentiments” of Holocaust deniers such as Arthur Butz. Thus Gill’s “scholarly disgrace” is “a continuation and perfection of the twin systems of colonization and genocide which have afflicted Native America for 500 years” (Churchill 1998: 117). If Mother Earth is the giver and sustainer of life in American Indian communities, the “disgrace” of Mother Earth lay in how it seemed to take away what Churchill phrased as “the rights of American Indians to any modicum of cultural sanctity or psychological sanctity” (Churchill 1998: 116).

In the aftermath of Churchill’s response, and a series of “letters of outrage from community leaders” among Denver-area Indians to University of Colorado administrators (Churchill 1998: 107) seeking some formal action against Gill, the campus was tense with, as one Canadian scholar visiting there on academic leave put it: “a highly charged stand-off that no one talks much about” (Grimes 2000: 79). According to another Canadian, the controversy “was simmering all across North America” (Parkhill 1997: 1) and had expanded from a focus on the merits of Gill’s claims to a more general conflict about the competence of those teaching native religions, the role of scholarship, and the continued legacy of colonialism within the academic world.

In light of these far-ranging debates, what might be said about Mother Earth herself? A first consideration is Mother
Earth’s puzzling historical presence. Were historians experimental scientists, they might confirm or dismiss Gill’s claims about Mother Earth’s illusive existence in the documents by a repetition of his research. As it stands, few besides Churchill have argued against his suspicious reading of the Tecumseh story, and several reviewers found it impressive detective work. However, even if Mother Earth in print is more a shadowy figure than the clearly framed textual center of American Indian understandings of the sacred, what exactly to conclude about her sketchy documentary existence is still subject to some debate. Though print may create the surest sort of knowledge, and establish the most real of identities, it did not then have the power to travel persuasively – as Schoolcraft’s “on the bosom of my mother” statement must have if Gill is right – across the tribal hinterlands of both American continents in the short space of a few decades, or at most of little more than a century. Gill’s reading of history seems as hard to accept as the pronouncements of Eliade.

A second consideration is how Mother Earth might best be conceptualized, assuming she can be attested to either in documents or through cultural tradition. Gill sought a singular “goddess,” and in not finding one, or in finding one only recently invoked, concluded that Mother Earth had not been central to pre-contact traditions. Is Mother Earth a goddess, though? Issues of category translation arise here, as Osage theologian George Tinker acknowledged in a consideration of Gill’s work posted on the internet after the initial controversy had receded. No “Native American language . . . even has a word for ‘god’ or a word that can be easily and appropriately translated as ‘god’ in the English language sense” (Tinker 2003). Like “Great Spirit,” which Tinker calls “a popular white man’s formula,” the English expression “Mother Earth” is a term arising out of the exigencies of crosscultural contact, negotiation and conflict.

Gill’s succumbing to the tendency among many European and American interpreters of Indian religious life to impose contestable categories derived from Western traditions has an instructive parallel in James Walker’s life to impose contestable categories derived from Western European and American interpreters of Indian religious negotiation and conflict.

Likewise, in keeping Mother Earth as metaphor separate from Mother Earth as theology, Gill employs controlling assumptions about theology that are unvoiced, and perhaps with good reason, not easily shared among American Indian expressers of Mother Earth. If Walker constructed his cycle of Lakota stories with the aid of culturally foreign conceptions, Gill seems to have deconstructed native religions as a whole, aided by an equally alien conception of theology. This may account for the reaction among Indian Mother Earth readers so similar to the “amused” and “impatient” responses of those who heard Deloria read Walker.

A third consideration is that Mother Earth also gives rise to irony. Gill’s primary concern is to undercut the “top-down” study of religion (Gill 1987: 157), yet he repeats its absolute pronouncements and employs its universal categories of interpretation. More ironic is that Mother Earth’s defenders such as Churchill attack Gill for holding the same basic reading of colonialism in North America as they do themselves. On Gill’s account, Mother Earth has provided American Indians since Tecumseh’s day with enough common language and common concerns to forge a variety of movements, organizations and habits of thought to resist the dominant society’s assimilation goals. Through such responses Mother Earth became an important bridge between tribal cultures, and has helped establish a common sense of “Indian” identity augmenting that of tribal affiliation.

Churchill argues that Gill’s sins “of commission” include trying to prove that “the adoption of a belief in Mother Earth has led contemporary American Indians away from their traditional tribal/cultural specificity and towards a homogeneous sort of ‘pan-Indianism,’ ” which he says is simply “a variation on the standard rationalization that Indian rights no longer exist as such because Indians in the traditional sense no longer exist” (Churchill 1998: 112). This is surely an over-reading of Gill, however.

Gill highlights two periods during which public Indian articulation of Mother Earth furthered pan-tribal interests. During the 1890–1920s era, western tribes confined to reservations played the role of negative other to significant American land-use values. During the post-1968 civil rights era, Indians were able to reassert land claims, argue for increased sovereignty and make important political advances. Public figures such as first, the Santee Dakota author Charles Eastman, and later, American Indian Movement national director Russell Means, drew on Mother Earth during these periods in order to argue their
respective positions regarding Indian survival before both Indians and the larger American public, and in Means’s case, to international audiences as well. In both periods, Mother Earth enabled these and other Indian public figures to gain some moral high ground and to build solidarity within and across Indian communities in support of their critiques of American policy. Churchill’s evident denial of this impact seems disingenuous, especially since his own role in the American Indian Movement – as an associate member of the United Keetowah Cherokee Band concerned about issues on Lakota land – illustrates Gill’s point.

Also troubling, is that Churchill seems to share Gill’s reading of the multisided history of Mother Earth’s role in political rhetoric. In part her success is dependent upon – and her assistance in advancing tribal goals endangered by – the spread of Romanticist images of the noble savage lying at the heart of late-twentieth-century American culture. In spite of his condemnation of Gill’s work, he would, by virtue of his own fundamental concerns, have to agree with Gill that the Mother Earth who aids in marketing consumable spirituality, prompts easy alignment with environmentalist agendas, and spreads through the literary works of those Gill calls “White Indians,” bears little resemblance to the one who might emerge in “balanced and informed presentations of Native American cultures and their religions” (Gill 1987: 148).

Matthew Glass

**Further Reading**


See also: American Indians as “First Ecologists”; Gaia; Hinduism; Indigenous Environmental Network; Mother Nature Imagery; Noble Savage; Plastic Medicine Men; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Romanticism and Indigenous People; Savages; United Nations “Earth Summits”.

**Mother Earth and the Earth People (Trinidad)**

The Earth People are an antinomian and “neo-pagan” community settled on the north coast of Trinidad in the Caribbean which originated in the visions of their leader Mother Earth (Jeanette MacDonald, 1934–1984). From 1975 until 1976, she had experienced a series of revelations: she came to understand that the Christian teaching of God the Father as Creator was false and that the world was the work of a primordial Mother, whom she identified with the African ancestors, with Nature and with the Earth. Nature gave birth to a race of black people, but her rebellious Son (God) reentered his Mother’s womb to gain her power of generation and succeeded by producing (or forcing her to create) white people. The Whites, the Race of the Son, then enslaved the Blacks and have continued to exploit them. The Way of the Son is that of Science – of cities, clothes, schools, factories and wage labor. The Way of the Mother is the Way of Nature – a return to the simplicity of the Beginning, a simplicity of nakedness, cultivation of the land by hand and with respect, and of gentle and non-exploiting human relationships.

The Son, in a continued quest for the power of generation, has recently entered into a new phase. He has now succeeded in establishing himself in Trinidad’s Africans and Indians and is also on the point of replacing human-kind altogether with computers and robots. Nature, who has borne all this out of love for the whole of her creation, has finally lost patience. The current order of the Son will end in a catastrophic drought and famine, nuclear war, or a heating up of the Earth, a destruction of the Son’s work, has finally lost patience. The current order of the Son will end in a catastrophic drought and famine, nuclear war, or a heating up of the Earth, a destruction of the Son’s work through his own agency, after which the original state of Nature will once again prevail.

Jeanette herself is a partial manifestation of the Mother who will fully enter into her only at the End. Her task at
the time of initial ethnographic fieldwork (1980–1982) was to facilitate the return to Nature by organizing the community known as Hell Valley, the Valley of Decision, to prepare for the return to the Beginning and to “put out the life” to her people, the Black Nation, the Mother’s Children. She has to combat the false doctrines of existing religions which place the Son over the Mother and to correct the distorted teaching of the Bible where she is represented as the Devil (hence “Hell Valley”). She stands for Life and Nature, in opposition to the Christian God who is really the Son, the principle of Science and Death. As the Devil she is opposed to churches and prisons, education and money, contemporary morals and fashionable opinions. Because God is “right” Mother Earth teaches the Left, and the Earth People interchange various conventional oppositions: “left” for “right;” “evil” or “bad” for “good.” Seeming obscenities are only Natural words for She Herself, who is the Cunt, the origin of all life.

The exact timing of the End was uncertain but it was expected in Jeanette’s physical lifetime. Then time would end, sickness would be healed and the nation would speak one language. The Son will be exiled to his planet, the Sun, really the Planet of Ice which is currently hidden by Fire placed there by the Mother: Fire which will eventually return to where it belongs, back to the heart of the nurturant Earth.

Mother Earth’s revelations ceased in 1975–1976 after an episode called the Miracle in which she brought the sun closer to the Earth. At this time her family was still living with her in a deserted village some fifteen miles from the nearest settlement, and they were joined by an assortment of young men, mostly old friends and neighbors of hers from Port-of-Spain, together with Rastafarians attracted by a newspaper article written about a family going naked in the bush. Her ideas were now consolidated in reflection and debate. By 1978 her title of “Mother Earth” was adopted, possibly after a recent carnival masquerade which had portrayed a large, fecund Earth Mother. Mother Earth continued to have visions in her dreams but these were similar to those of other members: premonitions and answers to the immediate organizational problems on which her attention was now focused.

While around sixty people have been active Earth People at different times, in October 1981, twenty-two were resident in the Valley, with perhaps twenty sympathizers and occasional members in town. There were annual naked marches into Port-of-Spain which sometimes ended in arrests with brief stays in the state psychiatric hospital for Mother Earth (with a variety of diagnoses), together with raids on the settlement by social workers which resulted in confinement of the younger children to an orphanage: Mother Earth’s youngest son escaped and trekked back to the community across the mountains. There were, however, supportive articles in two local periodicals, Ras Tafari Speaks and The Bomb.

Trinidad’s first prime minister had recently died and the government was preoccupied with an election: those in the Hell Valley group were left to themselves.

Only one other member of the group was female, with 16 young male followers between 18 and 33, most previously associated with the local cults of Rastafari or Spiritual Baptism, besides Mother Earth and her immediate family. The reason they gave for joining (to the visiting anthropologist in 1981) was the corruption and spiritual decay associated with the post-independence government, and a wish to return to a simpler natural lifestyle. In opposition to the material world, the group all went naked, sleeping out on the bare ground, and maintained themselves through fishing and cultivation of the land using only cutlasses.

The center of the community was the old wooden house of the deserted village into which Mother Earth had moved in 1972, together with some added “African” huts. For about half a mile in each direction, the secondary bush and scrub of the seasonal rainforest had been cleared and a variety of trees and perennial cultigens were grown: medicine bushes; trees and plants for cordage and wrapping and for basketry and calabashes; timber for building; plantain and banana; roots like cassava, sweet potatoes, dasheen, yam, tannia; aubergine, pineapple, tomato, pigeon peas, callaloo, okra; Indian corn, pumpkin, ginger, sugar cane, christophene; trees bearing oranges, grapefruit, guava, nuts, mango, avocado, pawpaw, pomerac, tamarind and breadfruit; garlic and bushes with pepper, shadobenny and other herbs. Above the settlement, reaching into the lower reaches of the mountains of the northern range, were cocoa and coffee, cannabis and tobacco. In the nearby bush were cress and watermelon, mauby bark, mammy apple, passion fruit, star apple, nutmeg and soursap, while along the coast grew coconut and almond. The variety of crops, virtually every Trinidad food plant, perhaps justified the boast of the Earth People that they were living in the original Eden.

Although all members accepted Mother Earth’s role as the Original Mother, the group was “this worldly” in their emphasis on present cultivation of the land and on the preparation and consumption of food. Daily agricultural labor ended with a swim in the sea and Mother Earth ritually dealing out the cooked vegetable food to the group. The central “rite of synthesis” (as anthropologists would put it) was this daily meal. The evening was passed with the smoking of cigars and ganja spliffs, and communal drumming and dancing with singing of their favorite anthems “Beat them Drums of Africa,” “The Nation It Have No Food” and “We Going Down Town to Free Up the Nation.”

Each new member took a “fruit name” – like Breadfruit, Coconut, Cassava or Pumpkin. Relations between members were fairly egalitarian, and not especially...
“religious,” generally recalling those of the average Trinidad working-class family. Supposedly the group was living in the Beginning of the End, a run-up to the eventual, very physical, end of the world, but little time was spent on millennial speculation. Painted words on the main house proclaimed “Fock [sic] God” – a sentiment in accord with the group’s opposition to Christianity and Islam (although there was a more sympathetic attitude toward Rastafari and Shango Baptism as being “half-way there”).

In 1982, with disputes in the group relating to differences in practical authority, and Mother Earth’s continued illness, relations deteriorated, splits occurred and the settlement was burned. Mother Earth died in 1984, and by the late 1990s, the Earth People were split into four groups, one on the original site. For all four, what has remained central is less Mother Earth’s personal messianic vision than some sense of a more “natural” and “African” style which her own life had embodied.

Roland Littlewood

Further Reading
See also: Caribbean Cultures; Mother Earth; Rastafari.

Mother Nature Imagery

Mother Nature is a central theme in religion and ecology. The notion that the natural environment is, either metaphorically or literally, a mother to all humanity is an ancient and influential one. Mother Nature imagery speaks directly to the experience many people have of the environment providing both physical and spiritual refueling, two things that the real “good ol’ Mom” often provided as well. People frequently report wilderness experience – even a stroll in a city park – to be rejuvenating, transformative, and spiritually fulfilling. But the notion of Mother Nature is also controversial, as seen from the various perspectives of gender studies, environmentalism, and religious faith. A feminist perspective asks about the negative effects on mothers and on women in general of using her as a “fuel source.” Environmentalists add the argument that casting nature as mother can easily compound ecological problems if nature is then viewed as a never-ending source of energy and resources. And people of varying religious faiths disagree as to whether nature is properly understood, either metaphorically or literally, as a divine goddess and whether such a view is justified as a corrective to patriarchal theism.

An Ancient Tradition of Imagery in Western Religion and Culture

The sense of the environment as bountiful female participates in a long and powerful tradition of association. The Mother Nature image, or that of nature as the Great Mother, appears to be almost timeless. It is found in figurines, cave paintings, and burial practices that date back to early human prehistory. Nature as the Great Mother may, indeed, be the oldest human religious idea. Paleolithic peoples regarded nature as the Great Mother who nurtured them much like a mother feeds and cares for her infant child. The Goddess of Laussel, one of the earliest such images we have, was sculpted from a rock face at the entrance to the cave of Cap Blanc, near Les Eyzies in the valley of the Dordogne, France. It dates back about 21,000 years. This Paleolithic figure holds up a notched bison horn, believed to represent the crescent moon and the thirteen-month lunar calendar. Her rounded, fleshy buttocks and belly are common among the goddess figurines of the time. The rock relief is painted with red ochre, symbolizing the powerful color of birth and menstruation.

The Classical Greeks revered the Earth Goddess Gaia – in a usage currently resurrected by some scientists, environmentalists, and neo-pagans – as “Mother of All.” The Romans sang a hymn to the holy goddess Tellus Mater (Mother Earth), Mother of Living Nature. This second century Roman hymn reads in part:

The food of life
Thou metest out in eternal loyalty
And, when life has left us,
We take our refuge in Thee.
Thus everything Thou dolest out
Returns into Thy womb (Getty 1990: 10).

In the first century, the Alexandrian Jewish scholar Philo identified nature with mother and with food-provider. This example helps make the important point that Mother Nature imagery is part of a larger association in Western religion and culture that links together women and nature. The imagery not only functions to portray the environment as maternal, but also to reinforce common cultural notions that women are “nature-like” or closer to nature than men. Philo, for example, sees Earth and women alike as sharing a “teeming” fertility and a bountifulness that they offer freely to all offspring:

Nature has bestowed on every mother as a most essential endowment teeming breasts, thus preparing in advance food for the child that is to be born. The earth also, as we all know, is a mother, for which reason the earliest men thought fit to call her “Demeter,” combining the name of “mother” with that of “earth”; for as Plato says, earth does not
imitate women, but woman earth . . . Fitly therefore on earth also, most ancient and most fertile of mothers, did Nature bestow, by way of breasts, streams of rivers and springs, to the end that both the plants might be watered and all animals might have abundance to drink (in Glacken 1967: 14).

While in these examples, Mother Earth willingly “metest out the food of life,” in another version of the theme, humans violently take that sustenance from her. Here we see that Mother Nature imagery portrays the environment not only as a life-giving female who is beneficent toward humanity and beloved in return (the Good Mother), but also as one who is wounded or conquered by humans (the Hurt Mother or Bad Mother). All three motifs play an important part in Mother Nature imagery.

Mother Nature as Good, Bad, and Hurt
The Hurt Mother motif emerges as early as ancient Rome, where strictures against mining (in comments by Pliny, Ovid, and Seneca, later repeated in the Renaissance) expressed concern about violating Mother Earth by stripping precious metals from her womb in a process that despoils the Earth’s surface and fuels human avarice and war. “When will be the end of thus exhausting the earth?” asked Pliny in worried lament (in Merchant 1980: 30). Mother Nature is also sometimes wounded because her conquest by humans is held to be justified and rightful. A famous chorus from Sophocles’s play Antigone (ca. 441 B.C.E.) celebrates man’s conquest over nature:

Oh, Earth is patient, and Earth is old,  
And a mother of Gods, but he breaketh her,  
To-ing, froing, with the plough-team going,  
Tearing the soil of her, year by year.

Nature is still a fertile mother who provides for humanity, but now that bounty is taken by force. This example highlights the ancient identification of the female and the plowed earth that forms an important part of the woman–nature association. The identification reoccurs later in the play when Antigone’s uncle Creon – a character seemingly obsessed with the need for men to control women – defends his decision to kill his rebellious niece, betrothed to his son, with the contemptuous line, “There are other fields for him to plow.” In these examples, neither nature nor woman is in control of her fertility, but is depicted as tamed and mastered by man/humans.

The Bad Mother motif of nature as a recalcitrant or withholding mother intensifies with the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Historian Carolyn Merchant argues that the image of nature changes in this period from “active teacher and parent” to “mindless, submissive [female] body” (1980: 190). The language of the new experimental science and its mechanistic worldview is often that of sexual mastery, of enslavement and rape, as in Francis Bacon’s promise in The Masculine Birth of Time: “I am come in very truth leading to you nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave” (in Merchant 1980: 170). Baconian imagery of domination over nature includes references to mining as wresting hidden secrets and goods from nature’s withholding womb, and how through use of anvil and forge, nature can be “forced out of her natural state and squeezed and molded” (in Merchant 1980: 171).

Both the Hurt Mother and Bad Mother motifs became more frequent as ecological damage mounted in modern Western culture. Smohalla, a Native American of the Columbia Basin Tribes and leader of a small group resisting settlement and treaty, spoke out famously against European–American attitudes to the land around 1885. Making skillful use of maternal metaphor to contrast the impact of his people’s traditional root gathering, Smohalla told a visiting cavalry officer:

We no more harm the earth than would an infant’s fingers harm its mother’s breast. But the white man tears up large tracts of land, runs deep ditches, cuts down forests, and changes the whole face of the earth . . . Every honest man knows in his heart that this is all wrong (in Gill 1987: 54).

And from the dustbowl crisis of the 1930s, American painter Alexandre Hogue created powerful art that despair over the damage of land erosion. His oil painting Mother Earth Laid Bare (1938) shows a woman’s naked body outlined in the barren ground, stripped of all topsoil. Hogue describes her as “raped by the plow and laid bare” (DeLong 1984: 120). More recently and with equal imagistic verve, Jim Morrison, vocalist and songwriter for the 1960s rock group, The Doors, inquires in their 1967 song “When the Music’s Over”: “What have they done to the earth?/What have they done to our fair sister?” (I take Morrison here to be drawing on 1960s counterculture egalitarian language of “sister/brother” in order to make an environmentalist point about solidarity with the plight of “Mother Earth.”) His answer is a graphically violent image of the Hurt Mother, spoken over chaotic drumbeat and disintegrating guitar riffs:

Ravaged and plundered  
and ripped her and bit her.  
Stuck her with knives  
in the side of the dawn  
and tied her with fences  
and dragged her down.

The modern environmental movement draws heavily on this ancient tradition of imagery depicting nature as
our loving but wounded mother, who now suffers from the human pressures of population, technology, and disrespectful practice. Reflecting an activist agenda, the imagery features humans as her/its healers. For example, Turner Broadcasting has a successful children's cartoon series called “Captain Planet and the Planeteers” and “The New Adventures of Captain Planet” in which five children from around the world work with the environmental superhero Captain Planet to protect Gaia, the spirit of the Earth and our “archetypal mother.” The well-known environmental slogan “Love Your Mother” fits in this same category, with its implicit message that we must now help and heal she whom we have harmed.

Bad Mother Nature imagery continues to thrive as well. It is found perhaps most commonly today in references to the “wrath of Mother Nature” in everyday conversation and professional reporting about the weather and such natural disasters as floods, hurricanes, and volcanoes. The imagery is also often used by advertisers trying to sell their products by evoking a deep emotional response about the pleasure of human victory over the threats of nature. A recent campaign for the Nissan Pathfinder, for example, claimed Mother Nature was using fierce weather to try – unsuccessfully – to drown, burn, and blow away the human tucked securely and triumphantly into his SUV.

Given the radically different cultural contexts of all these examples, what accounts for the transmission of “Mother Nature” as a cultural trope across cultures and centuries? Why does it endure, and in forms similar enough to be recognizable from the Paleolithic, or at least the classical period, to today? For some, the apparent “naturalness” of the metaphor itself – based on the fertility of the Earth and on woman’s biological role as childbearer – is a sufficient explanation. From this perspective, nature, to the extent that it produces and provides for all life, simply seems like a mother. Others root the prevalence and longevity of the metaphor not so much in nature, as in culture: they focus on women’s childrearing role and supposedly greater capacity for nurturance as social constructions that only appear natural within patriarchal societies that assign women these roles. The social constructions that label childcare and nurturing in general to be “women’s work” then make the life-giving environment appear to be maternal also, since it too is expected to serve human needs.

Ecofeminist Critique
Ecofeminists have been the scholars most active in these debates documenting and deconstructing the meanings of Mother Nature imagery. Their most basic claim is that gender matters. A cursory study of Western culture, or even of current television weather forecasting, reveals “Mother Nature” to be a major motif in conceptualizing nature. Because of this prevalence, gender analysis and ecofeminism help get to the heart of how societies construct concepts of nature and how they structure human-nature relations. Furthermore, ecofeminist scholarship documents the function of the woman–nature link and demonstrates how women in patriarchal contexts tend to suffer from it. Sherry Ortner, an anthropologist, was one of the first to frame this problem. She argued that women are crossculturally perceived to be closer to nature than men and claimed that this perception accounts for women’s universal subordination, since nature is itself universally devalued. Others – such as Dorothy Dinnerstein, Annette Kolodny, Carolyn Merchant, Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Susan Griffin – responded and contributed to the debate.

Their argument is that, in patriarchal culture, when women are symbolically associated with nature, or seen as having a particular affinity with nature that surpasses that of men, then women are seen as less fully human than men. Mother Nature imagery works to associate the feminine more with the carnal, the emotional, and the physical and to associate the masculine with the cultural and the intellectual. Susan Griffin, for example, in her passionate and poetic book Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her (1978), illustrates how this traditional association contributes to women’s voicelessness and powerlessness by assigning woman the roles of passive and obedient reproducer and nurturer (in her chapter entitled “Cows”), obstinate and dull-witted drudge, bred for labor the breeders do not wish to do (in the “Mules” chapter), and well-trained and well-groomed gratifier of her master (“The Show Horse”). One way to put this point reveals the connection between woman-as-nature and nature-as-mother: in patriarchal culture, women are under-personified and nature is over-personified. Women are perceived to merge with nature as a servile resource, Dinnerstein says, as “an asset to be owned and harnessed, harvested and mined” (1976: 36). Even when women are exalted as purer than men, as less bestial, and as the “guardians of culture and morals,” Ortner points out that these seeming inversions merely place women above instead of below culture and that women, in both cases, remain excluded from the realm of culture. The consequences here for both women and nature can be noxious. Both are seen as an endless source of succor, who, if she fails to provide what we want, is cruelly withholding it, so justifying our exploitation or plunder.

Nature Spirituality
Although ecofeminists share these concerns about imaging nature as mother in any society still shaped by patriarchal devaluations of women and nature, they and others with interests in religion and ecology agree there is nevertheless a positive role to be played by Mother Nature imagery. The imagery remains compelling, important, and apt, especially if its patriarchal cultural context can be critiqued and resisted. For example, popular ecological
slogans like “Love Your Mother” could become more effective if “mother” meant less exclusively the self-sacrificing, ever-giving nurturer. Maternal metaphors do express the environmental truth that nature provides all life and sustenance, as does the childbearing mother. Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen’s endorsement from the twelfth century rings equally true today for many eco-theologians and practitioners of nature-based spirituality: “The earth is at the same time mother. She is mother of all that is natural, mother of all that is human. She is the mother of all, for contained in her are the seeds of all” (Fox 1988: 11, 13). Such language makes much intuitive sense to feminists and nonfeminists alike and can serve the important environmentalist role of facilitating people’s sense of connection with nature.

The Earth has functioned as a very powerful and ancient center for worship and for seeing the divine as female, a resource important for many feminist theologians. Such meanings and ritual practices are revived today in various forms of syncretistic nature religion: neo-paganism, Wicca, ecofeminist spirituality, and eco-theology. Artist Judith Anderson, for example, combines commitments to environmentalism and woman-centered spirituality in a powerful etching entitled “Missa Gaia: This is My Body” (1988). Here the Great Mother sits in a birthing position. The world’s animals flow from her and merge with her, boundaries of self and other barely discernible. Anderson describes her Great Mother as embodying “both celebration and profound grief and anger” (Middlebury symposium 1990). This Mother, in other words, is at once Good and Bad and Hurt. In such contexts of religious experimentation and renewal, women might well sometimes see themselves as “closer to nature,” as when celebrating their bodies, their ability to create new life, or the interrelation of all species. Indian feminist theologian Aruna Gnanadason suggests that “the fear of what is being done to the earth is giving women the urgent imperative to assert their connectedness with nature . . . more specially in the Third World where the struggle for survival is the most acute” (1996: 77–78). Mother Nature imagery thus has the power to evoke a whole range of both patriarchal and feminist notions of what “mother” means and projects these meanings onto the environment, with consequences both oppressive and liberatory.

Significance of Mother Nature Imagery

The present human situation is one of ecological perilment, and Mother Nature imagery, in some ways, seems only to render matters worse. Images of the Good Mother make environmental destruction appear less of a problem, for the bounty of nature is then inexhaustible. And when the Bad Mother is invoked, striking back against nature becomes a good. Mother Nature imagery is hardly the sole means by which the environment is represented in the cultural imagination. It is, however, popular, pervasive, widespread, and immediately understood. That groups as diverse as environmental organizations and auto manufacturers use it for their ends indicates that this imagery elicits powerful and conflicting responses in a large and varied audience. The imagery holds sway from shared and deep recesses of personal and cultural fantasy.

The remarkable diversity of emotional response in the Mother Nature imagery – sometimes loving and respectful, sometimes condescending and controlling, sometimes suspicious and fearful, and sometimes downright violently adversarial – is significant in itself. It suggests a fundamental ambivalence toward nature. The imagery reveals not simply connection, but complex, ambivalent tendencies toward both violent control and loving repair in human relations toward nature. Mother Nature imagery yields insight into these tensions that, while probably intensified by the present hyperconsumerism of American culture, seem generally characteristic of Western modernity. The imagery suggests that many people may resist and refrain from a committed environmentalism because it is easy and comforting to imagine that nature’s provisions are ever-abundant and guaranteed. Overall, imagery of Mother Nature – even when putatively environmentalist – can portray a response toward nature that is ambiguous and uneasy and can undermine its own activism.

That such ambivalent passions are found in Mother Nature imagery is not surprising. The imagery is so rich, so provocative, so imagistically intense, precisely because it seems to embody central riddles or universal problems about human identity and experience. Part of what it means to be human is to confront the meaning of our “creatureliness,” the riddle of our existence as beings within the context and constraints of a natural environment. One perennial way we do this is through Mother Nature imagery that tells us the relation is one of familial dependence or interdependence. The imagery also serves a cultural purpose of exploring the riddles of gender difference and of the problem of evil. In all societies, although in different ways, gender acts as a significant lens for structuring social relations: why is this the case and why do patterns of subordination result (paralleling patterns of ecological degradation)? Why do we hurt one another (including the Earth) and how can we establish communities of care? Is the metaphor of mother (or parent) and child the answer?

Catherine M. Roach

Further Reading


See also: Ecofeminism; Gaia; Mother Earth.

**Motion Pictures**

In the past two decades, humanity’s interaction and relationship with the natural world has become a notable theme in many popular feature films. These films present different stories and interpretations of how nature can be viewed and how humanity should respond to it. Whether based on true events or fictionalized dramas, film narratives present us with concepts and images about reality and the way the world does or could function (Turner 1999). Since films often function on a series of storytelling formulas and electronic stereotypes, this enables us easily to identify dominant perceptions of nature in popular culture. Identifying these themes might also lead to a need to reinterpret these conceptions, especially as they relate to spiritual relationships between the material, natural and non-material worlds. As Martin and Ostwalt claim, “Films do much more than simply entertain [they] have the potential to reinforce, to challenge, to overturn, or to crystallize religion’s perspectives, ideological assumptions and fundamental values” (Martin and Ostwalt 1995: vii). Therefore it is important to recognize the power of film to inform our views and values concerning how we perceive and treat the natural world as it relates to spiritual themes. Three common themes dealing with religion and nature presented through motion pictures are: nature as an instrument of God, nature as a metaphysical realm, and nature as a religious storyteller.

**Nature as an Instrument of God**

Humanity’s conflict with nature is a common theme in films. This conflict often centers on human attempts to control nature. When humanity fails and nature is proved to be more commanding, this is often interpreted in religious terms. Nature is viewed as a spiritual force directed by the “hand of God.” Biblical language and apocalyptic pictures often emerge in these characterizations.

This is most clearly demonstrated in films dealing with weather where humanity only has the ability to respond. Nature is unpredictable at best, destructive at its worst. Two recent examples of this are *Twister* (1996) and *The Perfect Storm* (2000); both stress the fury of nature and humanity’s vulnerability. *Twister* is based around the storm-chasing researchers who spend their days pursuing tornadoes in an attempt to study and refine their ability to predict these natural phenomena. Tensions rage as former partners are reunited to race against time and a competing research team as they try out their new storm-measuring technology. While humans attempt to map and comprehend the tornadoes, they cannot control their path of destruction. The “finger of God” blows where it wills. There is a sense of awesomeness and divine beauty in the chaos, that no matter what technology or means are employed, the fury of nature can only be adapted to but not controlled. The characters progressively come to terms with the fact that nature has a power beyond the human level.

Similarly in *The Perfect Storm* a fishing crew is overwhelmed by the unpredictability of nature, when a dying tropical hurricane from Bermuda collides with a cold front from the Great Lakes resulting in the “Perfect Storm.” The captain and crew’s determination to take advantage of the last good fishing run of the season puts them in the midst of the worst storm in history. While skill, teamwork and determination do help the ship’s crew to maneuver through several near-fatal experiences, in the end, nature’s fury proves greater. One can question whether it was greed or desperation that put them in the situation to begin with, yet no matter the reason the outcome would have been the same as seen by the plight of others trapped in the storm. The ending scene brings us to a church where people remember the lost crew. Peace that comes after the storm appears to be found in the acknowledgment of a Higher Being.

Humanity’s attempts to control natural phenomena are displayed as futile in films. Therefore in these circumstances nature is to be feared and connected with the
unknown, uncontrollable God. This is illustrated again in *Volcano* (1997) where the erupted stream of lava is equated to the “wrath and will of God” and the city planner who built a subway system on a fault line is described with the biblical reference as “the foolish man who built his house upon the sand.” Since competing with God is futile, humanity only wins when it either accepts the majestic power of nature or when it fights to protect it.

**Nature as a Metaphysical Realm**

Another religious theme in nature-based motion pictures can be characterized as the metaphysics of interrelatedness, spiritual descriptions of nature's internal interactions. Here films focus on communal narratives and the physical and spiritual linking of different spheres of the created order.

Many animation films have portrayed these relationships and conflicts in playful ways, yet dealing with serious religious worldviews. In *The Lion King* (1994) this spiritual connection is described as the “circle of life” dealing with tension between species as well as themes of redemption and restoration. It presents a coming-of-age tale, as a lion cub becomes “King of the Jungle” and is a mix of African folk-tales and classical myths. Simba’s journey into adulthood begins with him facing the tragic death of his father King Mufasa. Simba’s rejection of the past brings decimation to the “Pride land” where plant and animal life are on the verge of extinction. This film focuses on the idea that all life is connected. This relates not only to ideas about the natural order, but also to the idea that within nature spiritual ideas are transferred. From nature comes wisdom, as illustrated by the spirit of the King speaking through the stars and a shamanic baboon advising Simba through nature-based illustrations. Redemption comes through Simba’s battle to confront the past and reestablish order. A depressed and ravaged natural environment represents evil. When the balance of good (i.e., Simba becoming king) is restored, the jungle and animal kingdom almost immediately returns to a state of splendor. This film interprets the world in terms of animistic spirituality, ancestor worship, and the spirit world speaking through nature.

Another film which focuses on the mystical interconnection of nature through an animistic worldview is the Disney animated feature *Pocahontas* (1995). In the film, nature is portrayed as possessing a voice that has the ability to speak to the heart. The voice of nature comes to Pocahontas through her mentor, Grandma Willow, a tree which encourages Pocahontas to listen with her heart to the voices of the forest who will direct her. She is “led” to a white man who falls in love with her. A clash of cultures and intentions results, yet love prevails and the Indians and English seemingly come to a peaceful truce. Thus nature’s voice leads those who listen to it toward their destiny. This portrayal of nature having a spirit is basically animistic. Those who acknowledge the voice and spirit of nature as Pocahontas are seen as enlightened and wise while the Englishmen who focus on gold are seen as shallow, selfish and destructive. Peace is equated with harmony with nature. This is a retelling of a traditional American myth highlighting a modified Native American understanding of nature.

Nature’s interaction with human society through spiritual channels is also represented in films dealing with myth and nature, often utilizing classic myths of the battle of good versus evil. In the animated production *Fern Gully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) the spirit and natural world appear intertwined. Everything is peaceful in Fern Gully until the intrusion of a clear-cutting logging crew, which wreaks havoc on the spiritual and physical balance of the rainforest. Young fairy Crysta saves the life of one of the logging crew, Zac, by shrinking him to her own size. Zac in turn learns the ways of the forest and helps the fairies battle evil spirits and logging destruction in an attempt to preserve this last bit of the rainforest. The myth expresses the conviction that goodness is based on a desire to nurture the environment while evil seeks to destroy it. Not every spirit in the forest is good, as seen by the demon Hexxus who seeks to destroy not only the fairies, but also the environment itself. The film infers that nature is not alone in maintaining its balance, but relies on the aid of the spirit world. While based in a fantasy realm, this idea of the need for spiritual intervention in the battle against environmental destruction is a prevalent theme.

Nature as a spiritual realm where religious themes guide the interactions of animal and plant systems is demonstrated through the above-mentioned films. Relationships within the animal kingdom seem to mirror the struggle portrayed between humans and nature. Yet, instead of an external God-figure guiding the outcomes and effects of the natural world, it is spiritual forces within, be they animistic or magical, that guide the cycles of nature. The focus in these films is not one of power as it appears on the surface, but often of good versus evil.

**Nature as Religious Storyteller**

Films about nature also deal with underlying stories of meaning; narratives that seek to make sense of the world and share that sense with others. Often this searching uncovers various spiritual beliefs. John May (1997), in his analysis of a religious approach to film, states that film narratives can provide archetypal patterns, images and elements that frame meaning and mythic orientation, central values that illustrate human drives to live, love and transcend self. These patterns and myths can deal with very different religious persuasions or worldviews.

Engaging with the natural world can be portrayed in films as a path to the divine. Even in times of stress, the natural world possesses the ability to bring about spiritual revelation. The movie *Alive* (1993) features the underlying
story of how one survivor “found God on the mountain” while chronicling the true events of the 1972 plane crash of an Uruguayan rugby team. As rations run low the moral dilemma arises of whether eating the remains of their former companions is acceptable if they are to survive. Alive begins and ends with spiritual musings of one of the survivors about the nature of God and purposes to life. There are glimpses of the moral dilemma as to whether the ends (meaning survival) justify the means (inferring cannibalism). In the midst of this battle for survival of the fittest, which involves fighting starvation, avalanches, and winter storms, praying and reflection provide peace between storms. Those who survive, and are seemingly hailed as heroes, are those who do not let morals take precedence over the need for food. The film represents a traditional/theistic religious worldview. Nature brings death, but it also bring space for epiphany as it forces the survivors to engage that which is bigger than themselves, namely God, in order to survive and find hope.

The classic conflict of science versus religion has also been articulated in films that deal with the seen and unseen natural world. Contact (1997), based on a Carl Sagan novel, portrays science and discovery as forms of a spiritual quest. The central character is Ellie, a scientist who searches radio waves of space looking for life outside our solar system. She and the rest of her team hope their quest will lead to a message from another world . . . and it does. The researchers are soon overwhelmed as political, scientific and religious figures rally to assert their positions and have a part in this new discovery. Through the struggles, Ellie receives support from a spiritual advisor to the White House who urges her to accept the existence of a higher life-force. The film portrays classic tensions between science and religion. Religious faith is portrayed in a broad, fairly relativistic sense with the only really theological strongpoint being a belief in a higher power. Experience defines reality and spiritual engagement, representing a postmodern form of spirituality. At first Ellie rejects the idea of a God she cannot see, but changes her position after having an “alien” encounter she cannot prove to others. She asserts that because she knows she experienced it, then it must be real. While dealing with cosmic themes rather than natural sciences, the film relays the potential for science to engage with and possibly accept the idea of a “g/God” that cannot be seen.

The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Rings (2001) also deals with religious themes as a classic fantasy tale based on J.R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy. It centers on the “one ring” which holds the potential to manipulate dark powers and enslave the world. The Hobbit keeper of the ring, along with a band of elves, dwarfs and humans, must travel to the land of Mordor where it was created and can alone be destroyed. This journey through a dark environment is also a sort of spiritual quest. Tension between free will and providence are highlighted by Frodo’s choice to accept the quest to return the ring and at the proclamation by the wizard Gandalf that other forces are at work guiding our fate. Temptation surrounds the ring in a mystique that challenges even the purest of intentions of Frodo’s protectors. In the midst of this there is hope as fellow journeymen fight to protect Frodo and his quest.

In The Two Towers (2002) there also is Fangorn, who demonstrates traits of druidic spirituality, as he summons his fellow tree protectors and raises them as troops to fight, if only partly, in response to the destruction of his forest.

The mythical environment is a shell for a deeper purpose. The journey through this environment seems as important as the destination. This film represents a complex system of myth- and magic-based beliefs. Here there is no higher being representing an ultimate good; the central battle against evil is a fight against the evil within the self and in various levels of the represented created order.

Investigating this theme of nature as a religious storyteller demonstrates how films can present traditional/theistic, postmodern spiritual, and mythical and magical views of the natural world. Numerous other films could be mentioned for the other religious or ideological interpretations of nature that they present: for instance, The Matrix (1999) using a combination of Greek mythology, Christianity and Buddhism to describe a world destroyed by humanity and dominated by a new biotechnological order; Planet of the Apes (2001) introducing an adapted postmodern, civil religion in which apes are the highest form of the created order; or Signs (2002) where crop circles and alien attack are designed to lead characters toward the recovery of a traditional Christian faith. In these and other films traditional images and myth orientations are used to point the viewer to a spiritual narrative. Archetypal framing of the characters and scenes and implied ideals of the film’s underlying theme craft the overall message.

Recognizing the stories films tell us about nature can be an insightful way to identify beliefs and conceptions found in popular culture regarding our natural world. This also provides us the opportunity to reinforce, challenge, overturn or even crystallize the images and religious interpretations these stories pose. Images portrayed express the spiritual and physical perceptions of reality and projections of how the world could be. More than just visual stories, these films become texts of the religious mindset of our current culture. Film narratives can also be used as teaching tools and illustrations for inspiring environmental action, or at least, reinforcing responsible caring and stewardship of the natural world.

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Further Reading


Films


See also: Disney; Disney Worlds at War; Middle Earth; Theme Parks.

Mount Nyiro and the Samburu (East Africa)

The Samburu nomadic pastoralists occupy a semi-arid region in north-central Kenya with a complex topography of lowlands and highlands. The lowlands are dry regions of sparse savannah vegetation, while the forested mountains receive slightly higher rainfall, serving as dry-season grazing while the lowlands are used for wet-season grazing. The region has few permanent water sources but is crossed by seasonal streams. The local people dig sand wells in the river beds to obtain water for their livestock and personal use; there are also springs around the lower mountain slopes. Rainfall totals and annual distribution are highly variable and severe droughts that kill large numbers of livestock usually occur at least once in a decade.

Like the other pastoral regions of Kenya, the Samburu homeland has been characterized by the slow pace of modernization, partly attributed to limited interaction with the more developed high potential areas of the country and the influences of the Western world. The Samburu have generally maintained their traditional way of life with little change over the years; indigenous religious beliefs and practices are still strongly held, especially among the older generation. These beliefs and practices have contributed significantly to the conservation of their environmental resources. As pastoralists, they are totally dependent on pasture, water and plants for livestock keeping. The Samburu, therefore, have an intimate relationship with their environment which is interwoven in their traditional religious beliefs and practices. They are a deeply religious people, as is demonstrated through their understanding and relationship with their God. To them, God is an essential part of their existence; indeed, the Samburu name for God is also the word for rain, *Nkai*. Just as rain is the most important climatic element for their existence, it determines the pasture and water necessary for their systems of livestock keeping, so is the Samburu God of vital importance to them.

The Samburu have a strong religious attachment to mountains. To some extent, all the mountains and highland masses within their territory are considered special areas with religious significance, as they believe that God has a preference for highland areas. However, Mount Nyiro is considered a special sacred site for the Samburu people, for it is here that God resides. They have even a specific location on Mount Nyiro where he lives, called Kosikosi. Though Kosikosi is not the peak of the mountain, it is a strikingly distinct peak and an important high point, where God is believed to have his seat at a particular rock, called Ndadapoi. In many ways, Mount Nyiro symbolizes God’s presence among the Samburu.

The Samburu believe that God has human characteristics, including sensory attributes. God can hear and see just like human beings and has the ability to know. However, it is important to note that the Samburu recognize that God has qualities superior to those of human beings. They believe God has absolute power and is omnipotent and therefore knows everything that happens even in secret and even before it happens. When a person is seen wanting to do evil, he is warned with the words "mintining Nkai nemintodol" (let God not hear or see what
you are planning to do). This means that God can read people’s thoughts and can punish you. The Samburu use these attributes of God to control their moral behavior, including behavior related to environmental conservation. They believe that God is offended and angered by people’s unacceptable actions such as misuse of the environmental resources.

The Samburu God is also perceived to have human features, which the Samburu use to express their total dependence on God for existence and, therefore, the need to please him. The most significant are God’s back, armpits and the belly, which depict God’s ability to provide shelter, protection, security and love to humans. This is vividly described in this Samburu prayer:

\[ \text{Nkai ai, tanapa iyioo – God carry us on your back, as a mother does with her baby} \]
\[ \text{Nkai ai, tejapa iyioo te nkitikit inono – My God, hide us or secure us with your armpits} \]
\[ \text{Nkai ai, tipika iyioo atua Nkosheke ino – Place us inside your belly} \]
\[ \text{Nkai ai, imbung’a iyioo te atua nkosheke ino – Keep us inside your belly} \]
\[ \text{Nkai ai, irrita iyioo to nkosheke naibor – Pasture us with a white belly with love (Lolarrrarri 2000).} \]

The well-watered mountain and highland areas are a constant reminder to the Samburu of their God who sits on Mount Nyiro. It is still strongly believed among the Samburu that God gives the rain or withholds it. This could explain why God is equated to rain, which expresses God’s actions and demonstrates his vitality and power. Rain is a direct manifestation of God’s benevolence to humankind as through the giving of rain he replenishes the Earth by watering the dry ground and satisfies the thirst and hunger of the people.

The Samburu believe that God predetermines everything and that the only role people can play on Earth is to complement God’s efforts and will. This is expressed as “Materetore Nkai” which literally means, “let us work together with God and not against him.” This could be interpreted to mean working and living in harmony with the natural environment. Destruction of the environment can anger God who is able to punish the people. One of the worst punishments from God seems to be the withholding of rain, which means life and death to the Samburu.

Prayers, sacrifices and incense are offered to God from Mount Nyiro. Any Samburu will always face Mount Nyiro in prayer regardless of where they may be within their extensive grazing territory, signifying their unity of culture despite different exposures and interactions with other communities. They always face the direction of Mount Nyiro when praying, just as the Muslims face Mecca. Mount Nyiro is where most sacrifices and prayers are performed at Lorian le kosikosi. Lorian refers to open grassland with a permanent stream, often high on a mountain; such areas are often settlement sites. This is “the open space up the mountain at Kosikosi.” God communicates to the Samburu people about impending calamities or current disasters from Mount Nyiro. These messages are delivered to the people through God’s appointed messengers who live at the foot of the mountain. Many of the Samburu astrologers, dreamers/messengers, the rope interpreters and intestine readers are found around Mount Nyiro. These special messengers provide religious and cultural leadership to the community.

The Samburu people perform a number of sacrifices to their God. The sacrifices are done using livestock along with incense from a mixture of leaves and branches of special sacred tree species which are put together and burnt. The Samburu believe that God accepts their sacrifice when mixed with incense as represented in the saying: “Keing’uaya Nkai Lasar” (“God smells the sacrifice”). “Kelo nkuama e Lasar netii Nkai” (“The smell of the sacrifice goes where God is”).

The sacrificial animal is slaughtered and blessed with milk mixed with water, and with words “Torropilo, taalorian, taa Lmalmal matan iyie an ntasim namunyak” ("be sweet smelling, smell like the olive tree, smell like incense, that you may be eaten as a blessed sacrifice"). These religious rites cannot be complete without the use of specific environmental resources. Sacrifices offered on Mount Nyiro are considered very special and sacred events. The Samburu offer sacrifices to God for different purposes, but the most important is to appease God when calamities befall them, as they believe these are the result of their wrongdoing. Calamities such as drought, famine, sickness, war, infant death, or female infertility require propitiatory sacrifices. Sacrifices are also offered for thanksgiving in recognition of blessings or good fortune that have come people’s way, or to invoke God’s guidance and protection. For example, young men of a certain age get together and offer sacrifices asking God to guide them as they start adult life.

Mount Nyiro provides a number of the environmental resources used in Samburu religious sacrifices and prayers. Due to their religious and cultural significance, the Samburu have established a complex system to ensure their conservation and sustainable use. This system is embodied within their religious and traditional practices. The resources are:

a) Water: Mount Nyiro is a source of seven important springs which are a lifeline for people and livestock on the different sides of this sacred mountain. The Samburu understand that the water from these springs is life to them which must be handled in a sacred manner, and they protect the sources using taboos and curses. Water is commonly used as Nkarrer (a mixture of water and milk) in blessings and prayers. The water used in these rituals is obtained specifically from one of the Mount Nyiro springs.
b) Plants: A number of plants from Mount Nyiro are used for burning incense and for other religious practices. For example, the bamboo has religious and cultural significance among the Samburu. The bamboo is closely linked to God. Samburu often refer to kosikosi as the place of the “talking bamboo,” and it is a place for offering prayers such as “the God of the talking bamboo, I pray to you” (Lolarrarri 2000). A number of taboos are used which have been instrumental in the conservation and sustainable use of the bamboo. Bamboo can only be cut when there is a full moon. This helps to control the harvesting period. The sacredness of the bamboo is also maintained through restrictions on its uses; for example, the fact that it must never be used as a stick to discipline children. Several other tree species used in burnt offerings are found only on the mountains.

c) Green grass is a symbol of peace and wealth and has a direct link to livestock, the Samburu source of wealth. When green grass is plentiful, the livestock will be healthy and strong. The Samburu use green grass as a mark of regret and repentance; the person asking for forgiveness pulls a handful of green grass and shows it to the other person while pleading for another chance. During traditional ceremonies such as circumcision and in traditional prayers, green grass is used variously to signify peace and as part of the prayers.

Mount Nyiro also has considerable ethnobotanical significance as the source of certain medicinal plants, which cannot be found anywhere else in Samburu District. As many as 135 species of trees and shrubs have been identified by the Samburu as having medicinal value. Recent studies have shown that most of the ethnomedicinal and ethnoveterinary remedies are plant-based. Surveys show that most of these materials are obtained from mountain areas. One particularly important mountain plant is Seketet (Myisine africana), which is widely used for both humans and livestock as a de-wormer. It is probably the most commercially used medicinal plant in the district and beyond.

Mount Nyiro has for generations served as a fortress to the Samburu people against raids from neighboring communities. The Samburu believe that they owe their existence partly to this mountain, as they have frequently saved themselves and their livestock by escaping to Mount Nyiro where God gives them protection. Animals from the lowlands are moved to the safety of Mount Nyiro whenever there is a threat of attack. Even the Turkana, the main enemies of the Samburu, dread climbing Mount Nyiro to stage an attack.

Mount Nyiro also provides security to the Samburu people from ecological disasters such as severe droughts. With its greater environmental resources of pasture and water, the mountain is an important dry-season grazing area. The seven permanent springs that flow from the different sides of the mountain provide the only source of water to the surrounding areas at a time when it is most desperately needed. It is of special significance as it provides both physical security from raids, which escalate with drought intensity, as well as pasture and water.

In order to safeguard the use of Mount Nyiro and other exclusive grazing areas, the Samburu use their religious and traditional practices to enforce the controls. One of these is the curse which can be pronounced by the elders. It is called Ldeket le loip (the curse of the shade), referring to the shade tree where elders gather to exchange news or discuss specific issues. This is pronounced when a person misbehaves and disregards the warnings of the elders. It is an important cultural control with regard to grazing rights and exploitation of other environmental resources. Mount Nyiro has also benefited from legal protection from the Kenya Government through its designation as a state forest under the Forestry Department. The Samburu people have been given exclusive rights to grazing on the mountain.

Despite both traditional and modern forms of protection, the future of Mount Nyiro as a sacred mountain to the Samburu people is threatened by a number of factors. These are mainly manmade as a result of the dynamic changes taking place within the Samburu community and from outside. Growing insecurity among neighboring pastoral communities has seriously affected the Samburu's traditional use of Mount Nyiro. With the frequent raids, the Samburu are spending more time with their livestock on the mountain than is ecologically sustainable. This problem has also been aggravated by the frequent severe droughts, which necessitate longer periods on the mountain than the normal dry-season grazing period. This has resulted in overutilization of the mountain resources. Fires set by people to smoke out bees while harvesting honey in the forest have also been instrumental in degrading the environment. Development activities in the Mount Nyiro vicinity are also a potential threat. Human populations are increasing and settlement is becoming more permanent, creating an increased demand for resources such as timber, fuel wood and water. Mount Nyiro is also the site of an “ecotourism” lodge which was constructed against the wishes of the local people, who consider it a desecration of the holy mountain.

While it is true that the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Samburu reflect a strong influence on the way they utilize and conserve environmental resources, these valuable practices and knowledge are rapidly being eroded. This could perhaps be considered one of the most important internal threats to Mount Nyiro, as its historical basis for conservation is being undermined. The young people are increasingly being alienated from the pastoralist way of life because they have to go to school and later take up formal employment in urban areas away from the influence of their culture and traditional beliefs. The older generation of Samburu are concerned that God is unhappy
with the people because they are not offering sacrifices as they should. This is being attributed to the weakening of their religious beliefs and traditional practices. As one elder put it “God must have moved because there are no fresh bones at the Rock of Kosikosi of late” (personal communication with local elder Lengaur Lelait, in 2000).

Despite these threats however, the traditional beliefs and practices must be appreciated for the role they have played in the past in the preservation of environmental resources. Revival of these cultural values and the involvement of local communities must be seen as important elements in any future conservation efforts at sacred sites such as Mount Nyiro.

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Further Reading


See also: African Religions and Nature Conservation; Ethnobotany; Sacred Groves of Africa; Sacred Mountains; Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Mount Rushmore

Mount Rushmore, a 6000-foot-tall schist and pre-Cambrian granite peak, sits close to the center of South Dakota’s Black Hills, just shy of the geographical center of the North American continent. Gigantic visages of four American presidents rest on the summit, gazing off to the east across the prairies, carved out by Gutzon Borglum (1867–1941) and a host of federally subsidized workers between 1927 and 1941. In the decades since South Dakota historian Doane A. Robinson (1856–1946) first advocated patriotic mountain carving in the Black Hills’ Harney Peak area, Mount Rushmore National Memorial has become an internationally recognized icon of American nationalism, a curious blend of nature, art, politics and piety.

For Doane Robinson, the link between sculpture and the Harney Peak region of the Black Hills was obvious, given the extensive collection of naturally carved pinnacles left there from millions of years of erosion. Carving into their surface heroic figures of Western exploration and conquest – such as Buffalo Bill, Jedidiah Smith or Lewis and Clark – would, he thought, help preserve the memory of the virtuous pioneers who had struggled to transform the Great Plains from prairie and near-desert into productive farm and rangeland. For Robinson, as for many Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what animated those pioneers was not simply human aspiration, but rather the “mystic dynamic of the universe,” which compelled them onward “to do deeds of miracle” (in Glass 1995: 157).

Robinson first broached the idea to an association of South Dakota innkeepers and roadside businessmen in 1923. His effort to memorialize the miraculous transformers of the west met considerable opposition, however, as Dakota newspaper editors – and their readers – took aim at his fundamental contention that the Hills were insufficiently beautiful as they stood. “Why should we add to, or rather, desecrate, the work of nature with the puny work of man?” Hills resident Maude Hoover wanted to know (in Glass 1995: 158).

Robinson’s reply, offered in correspondence, editorials and a campaign’s worth of speeches at business luncheons across the state, highlighted his theological conviction that nature, God’s creation, required something more from humans than mere romantic appreciation. “God did not quite complete his job in the Harney district, but left it for man . . . to finish . . . developing the seed of beauty which God has planted” (in Glass 1995: 158).

Although the romantic lovers of natural beauty who objected so strongly to Robinson may have been large in number, their suspicion that mountain carving was an act of desecration largely gave way over the next year. Perhaps Robinson got the best of the argument because Dakotans recognized that they too saw nature as something that required human transformation in order to be perfected. Many were also susceptible to his argument that such a memorial would bring considerable economic benefit to the hard-scrabble state.
Sculptor Gutzon Borglum, whom Robinson eventually approached—and himself the child of pioneers—saw the possibility of setting a larger drama in stone than simply that of settlers, explorers and army heroes. For Borglum, the size of the Black Hills outcroppings called forth a vision of the largest possible national scope. "American history itself shall march along that skyline," Borglum reportedly burst out when first seeing the top of Rushmore in 1924 (in Smith 1985: 33). The busts of Washington and Lincoln (and later Jefferson and T. Roosevelt) seemed to him far more fitting than western heroes, since their achievements and commitments were what made America possible to begin with.

Like Robinson, Borglum also shared the idea that nature itself prompts the transformations which human artistic, economic and political achievements require. Borglum's writings are rife with purple prose extolling the Anglo-Saxon spirit embodied in American institutions, which he saw as the product of both a natural and divine momentum. "America," he wrote, was "sired by aeons of upward struggle out of hair and leaves, out of mud and fear, out of slavery in galleys and cells" (in Glass 1994: 268).

Rushmore's stone, already nearly as old as the Earth itself, was the most fitting embodiment for the symbolic visages of the greatest American leaders. On many occasions Borglum told visitors admiring his progress that the faces were already present within the mountain. His drills, explosive caps and dynamite merely "relieved . . . from the head" excess granite (in Glass 1994: 274). In its apparent agelessness the granite would preserve, as well as art could insure, the virtues of American character and civilization. Rushmore's "wondrous cenotaphs"—as one anonymous poet put it—signaled in the social and political tumult of the early twentieth century that America might not suffer the fate of other nations.

That the memorial serves to give America a natural foundation is evident in the descriptions of the four presidents often found in promotional literature developed for visitors by the National Park Service, philanthropic associations and individual citizens. Washington, as the "father of his land," is often portrayed as the seminal figure. Jefferson, who saw political rights deriving from the laws of nature itself, is also memorialized for his purchase of the western half of the continent from Napoleon, making possible the great western expansion that Americans thought of as their God-given, natural destiny. Lincoln, who shepherded the nation through war, in his own words framed that war's massive spilling of blood as the nutritive means for national rebirth—in essence grounding America's future in the natural process of death. Roosevelt, something of a problematic figure for the memorial's early proponents, was the great western outdoorsman who "upon these Black Hills hunted" and also perfected nature's design by linking Atlantic and Pacific together in the Panama Canal.

In the late 1930s Robinson claimed to detect among the American public "a growing tendency to confer on the project a sort of mystical, semi-religious connotation," which he thought would only grow to become a "worshipful reflex" over time (in Glass 1995: 161). Certainly, he was correct to a significant extent.

In the decades since work ceased Americans have gathered at the memorial for Easter sunrise services, and since the Vietnam War for annual POW/MIA memorial services. Americans have married there, and some have wanted to be buried there—and at least a few have had their ashes scattered there. All of these activities conjoin the nation's political history with the natural phenomena of death and rebirth.

On numerous occasions concern about the commercial and inappropriate use of the Rushmore image has led to charges of desecration, perhaps most notably during the controversy caused by Alfred Hitchcock's filming of North by Northwest's climactic chase scene in 1958–1959. Hitchcock's murder and mayhem was widely viewed as an unsuitable linking of the memorial with the reality of death.

Robinson hoped that the worshipful reflex would be conducive to social harmony and greater "devotion to America." That this hope has not been completely realized is evident from the ways in which the memorial has become a kind of countersymbol. To some romantics, the original objections still seem right. To some it is merely kitsch. Some have campaigned to include the profiles of other significant Americans, such as feminist Susan B. Anthony.

Since the late 1960s many Native American activist groups have used the memorial as a focal point for protest. Although many sorts of political concerns have been raised there, what made the memorial seem especially appropriate for native protesters was the original underlying equation of natural beneficence and the spread of the American political order. Members of the Lakota nation in particular have generally remained skeptical that Rushmore's linkage of nature and nationalism is due to its sacred status. Their right to the Hills—acknowledged by Congressional treaty in 1868, and given moral legitimacy by the 1980 Supreme Court award of reparations which culminated the longest-running court battle in American history—has sparked continuing Lakota political effort to regain control of the Hills. In that effort Rushmore stands as an indictment of what scholars have come to call "civil religion."

Matthew Glass

Further Reading
Mountaineering

Mountaineering can be generally addressed as an encounter of humans and nature, as a relationship between human and mountain. Although this relationship can take on quite different qualities – from domination to sacralization – there is an implicit tendency to personalize and thus to ontologize the mountain as an individual entity. The climbing of a mountain has always been part of religious devotion, but it is only in early modern times that overcoming the difficulties related to high mountain walking became a symbol either of controlling the power of nature or of connecting spiritually with the transcendent realms high mountain areas stand for. A watershed in this regard was Petrarca’s climbing the Mont Ventoux (France) on 26 April 1336, which he described as an overwhelming experience that felt like being carried from space into time. He was the first in recorded Western history to have climbed a mountain for the mere longing to see the land from above and – as he told in his report – from a new perspective.

“Mountain,” like “nature” in general, is not a neutral term. Its aesthetic perception is fundamentally prefigured by mental dispositions and ideas that generate the object of experience in the first place. The mountains can be personalized as enemies, representing the dangerous and threatening aspects of nature that humans are about to conquer in a risky fight, or as a revelator of spiritual wisdom. The latter personalization talks of mountains as “father” or “mother” that care for their children on their spiritual path. Often mountaineering connects both forms of relationship.

The dominating aspect of climbing is of paramount importance for the Western relationship to mountains. This can be proven by a cornucopia of documents from the sixteenth century through today. But one has to point at the ambivalence of this engagement with mountains. On the one hand nature is the degraded “wild,” and the mountains symbolize the purest and most powerful manifestations of nature’s threatening that man struggles to overcome (one may think, for instance, of the mythical descriptions of expeditions to K2, Mount Everest, or the Eiger north face). On the other hand climbing a mountain means to overcome the dangers and weaknesses inside a person, thus mountaineering is a means to transgress the borders of bodily exhaustion in order to gain a fuller awareness of one’s own psychological or spiritual capacities.

Reinhold Messner, who climbed each 8000 meter peak and experienced a lot of emotionally touching situations (like cutting off his dead brother from the rope), time and again makes sure that climbing is a way to the inner self. Here, outer domination is mirrored by an internal conflict. This sheds light on the discussion of Messner’s meeting the “Yeti” or “Big Foot.” Whether or not this giant animal exists in the Himalayas, this story is definitely a transference of “the hero’s journey” (on which the climber meets the “dragon”) from internal into material realms.

Another aspect of mountaineering is its being depicted as revelation. Romantic authors often describe their meeting with mountains as an epiphany of nature’s sacred dimensions. Many nineteenth-century authors both from North America and from Europe could be mentioned here, from Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Novalis to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In this perspective, the mountain reveals the living beauty of nature and initiates a feeling of universal connectedness in the human climbing it. In modern environmentalism and the U.S. National Park movement, it was especially the mountains that (contradictorily) symbolized both the unconquered wilderness and the American project of universal salvation.

In the last three decades, mountaineering has been closely related to new developments within the “outdoor” scene. Although the disparate free-climbing movement is difficult to address generally and many climbers are not interested in ecological or even spiritual aspects of their sport, there is an undeniable relation between deep-ecological activities and the romanticized picture of free-climbing. A number of mountain climber-intellectuals are drawn to deep ecology because of spiritual experiences they have made outdoors, many of them being influenced by Arne Naess’ earliest environmental philosophy. Naess himself was an experienced climber and the first to ascend Tirich Mir (7690 meters; 25,230 feet), the highest peak in the Hindu Kush, in 1950.

Founders of internationally successful outdoor and climbing companies participate in grassroots deep ecological activities not only for advertisement reasons, but also as a consequence of their personal experiences that are often spiritually colored. This is true in particular for Doug Thompson (founder of “The North Face” and “Espirit”), who funded the “Foundation for Deep Ecology,” the “EcoForestry Institute,” and the “El Pumalin Bosque Foundation,” which ambitiously supports the idea of Pumalin National Park in Chile (“Pumalin” means “where Pumas live”). Yvonne Chouinard (founder of “Patagonia” Sacred Space. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, 152–86.
See also: Devils Tower, Mato Tipi, or Bear’s Lodge; Manifest Destiny; National Parks and Monuments (United States); Nature Religion in the United States.
Messner on Everest and Cosmos

Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler were the first two climbers to ascend Mount Everest without the use of oxygen. In his report of the expedition Messner wrote:

I have not come here to ascend Everest at any price. I wished to get to know it, in all its might, difficulty, and severity. And I was resolute to renounce the peak, should I not be able to climb it without a breathing mask: With that modern oxygen apparatus one simulates at the Everest a level of 6,000 meters. But to experience that level, I need not go to Everest. To acknowledge, to sense, and to feel the Everest's power, I have to climb it without technical tricks. Only then I know what a man undergoes there, which new dimensions will open before him, and if he can arrive at a new relationship to the cosmos (1978: 162).

Finally standing at the peak of Everest, Messner described his feelings thus:

Standing in the diffuse light, with the wind in the back, I suddenly have a feeling of all-inclusiveness (Allgefühl) – not the feeling of success and of being stronger than all those who came here before us, not a feeling of reaching the ultimate point, not omnipotence. Just a touch of happiness deep inside my head and breast. The peak that suddenly seemed to me like a resting place. As if I hadn't expected a resting place up here. At the sight of those steep, sharp ridges beneath us [we experience] the imagination that later we really would have come too late. Everything we say to each other now, we say in mere embarrassment. I don't think any more. While in a trance-like state I get the tape out of the backpack, switch it on, and try to speak a few reasonable sentences, my eyes are immediately filled with tears. "Now we are at Everest's peak; it is so cold that we cannot take photos," I later start the conversation with the tape recorder switched on. But right away crying again shakes me. I neither can talk nor think, but I feel this deep emotional commotion which throws me into a new balance. Only a few meters below the peak the exhaustion would have been the same, also the anxiety and the pain suffered; such a burst open of emotions, though, is only possible at the peak.

Everything that is, everything I am, is marked by the knowledge that I reached the final destination. The peak – at least temporarily – as naïve, intuitive answer to the question of being (1978: 180).

Kocku von Stuckrad

Further Reading


and “Black Diamond”) spends a fixed part of the company’s budget on grassroots environmental projects, many with a biocentric, radical environmental approach. Reinhold Messner (affiliated with “Salewa”) is a member of the European Parliament for the Green Party; and “Jack Wolfskin” (founded by the German Wolfgang Dausien) supports environmental projects around the world. Many of those brands explicitly refer to U.S. climbing romanticism (especially Yosemite Park), even when such relations are artificial, like in the “Think Pink” case, which was founded in Italy.

Kocku von Stuckrad

Further Reading


See also: Deep Ecology; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Fly Fishing; Naess, Arne; Radical Environmentalism; Rock Climbing; Sacred Mountains; Surfing.

Kocku von Stuckrad

Mountains and Rivers Sutra by Japanese Soto Zen Master Dogen Kigen (1200–1253)

The Sanskrit term sutra has been reserved throughout the Buddhist tradition for what is taught by a Buddha. Its use in the title of this text immediately suggests the extraordinary nature of Dogen’s 1240 address to a monastic assembly, written as a powerful attempt to combine the broad rhetorical sweep and spiritual depth of Chinese
Dogen Kigen's *Mountains and Rivers Sutra* [excerpts]
The mountains and waters of this very moment actualize the ways of the ancient Buddhas. Both settle in their phenomenal circumstances, yet realize perfect virtue. Because they existed before the kalpa of empty space had disappeared, they are alive at precisely this very moment. Because they had a uniqueness before forms had come about, they are emancipation.

The many virtues [spiritual powers] of a mountain expand, the virtues of riding the clouds are always reached from a mountain, and the mysterious power of soaring on the winds comes freely from a mountain . . .

A mountain can never be wanting in the virtues that it needs, so it always settles in ease and it is always moving. One of the first things to be examined in detail should be the virtues of this movement. Because a mountain moves just like a human moves, never doubt that a mountain is moving simply because it does not seem to move the way a human being does.

What the Buddhas and the patriarchs have explained to movement – this is the basis. Penetrate this “always moving” described to the assembly.

Because they are always moving, the motion of green mountains is swifter than the winds, but a person in the mountains does not realize or understand this. “In the mountains” is the blossoming of the entire universe. Someone who is away from the mountains does not realize or understand this. The people who cannot see a mountain appearing right before their eyes, cannot realize, cannot know, cannot see, and cannot hear it just as it is. If someone doubts the movement of a mountain that person does not even understand one’s own movement; if you do not know your own movement, then you will have to know the movement of a green mountain.

Green mountains are not sentient and they are not non-sentient. A person is not sentient and is not non-sentient. Right now there can’t be anyone who doubts the movements of green mountains.

Translated by Dennis Lishka

Mountains and Rivers Sutra

Buddhist Huayan concepts with a deeply personal vision of portraying the Soto practice of enlightenment (“to actualize the ways of ancient Buddhas”). Dogen was the founder of the Japanese Soto Zen school, its most sophisticated master, one of the greatest of native philosophers, and an unusually skilled writer of classical Chinese and Japanese. (This text is one chapter among nearly a hundred stemming from his massive life work, the *Shobogenzo or Treasures of the Essentials of the True Dharma.*)

Dogen supposes numerous religious images from Song dynasty (960–1279) Chinese culture: mountains as a primary *yang* expression of hardness, height, brightness, etc., as sacred pilgrimage sites, as Buddhist and Daoist training centers and retreats, as wilderness unsullied and uncontrolled by secular political authority; waters as the penultimate Daoist “flowing” reality, as a primary *yin* expression of softness, darkness, adaptability, nurture basic to life, etc. Mountains and waters is the common Chinese character compound *shan-shui* for “nature” as totality, for its depiction as landscape in ink-wash painting and literature, and for suggesting the *yin/yang* dynamic of extending upward toward the heavens versus running downward into Earth as well as immediacy of flow versus long-term solidity and stability. These are combined with a Japanese religious awareness of mountains as sacralized abodes of *kami* (or as *kami* themselves). (*Kami* are the archaic, indigenous Japanese conception of any being with powers beyond the human.) In addition, both of the major classical Heian period (eleventh–twelfth centuries) esoteric Buddhist schools were located in mountains – the Tendai school on the Mt. Hiei range northeast of Kyoto, and the Shingon school on the Mt. Koya range in traditional Kii province (modern Wakayama prefecture). (Dogen trained as a Tendai novice among the hundreds of temples on Mt. Hiei.) Indigenous Japanese religion carried a contamination/purity moral basis that saw waters as a primary means of purification in the removal of defilement (*tsumi*) caused by physical acts (i.e., death, killing, birth, menstruation) and by damaging emotions (i.e., jealousy, hatred, greed, etc.).

What is so powerful in Dogen’s vision is that here mountains and waters are viewed as Buddhas, as living enlightenment in a continuous practice of wisdom and compassion. Mountains and waters are alive; they exist in complete ease in their phenomenal circumstances, they express enlightenment, they realize inexhaustible “spiritual power” (as do Buddhas and ancestors).

Not only are mountains always moving (forward and backward, more swiftly than the winds), but they also flow (like waters), travel on water, ride the clouds, and their toes splash through waters – in other words they practice wisdom and compassion and actualize enlightenment. (“If movement stops, Buddhas and ancestors will not emerge.”) Mountains are uncommon territory (“although as a rule, mountains belong to nations, mountains belong to the people who love them”) because they are the places of retreat for great sages and saints. Thus mountains literally love people of virtue and continually absorb such virtues – they are the “heart/minds” of such people. The positive karma continually developing from actualizing enlightenment is the spiritual power (Japanese: *kudoku*), which is the “name-and-form” and the life-force of such mountains. Here the ordinary does not apply; absent are secular authority (“not places where imperial virtue reaches”), social custom (where rulers bow to saints), and human conceptualization (“do not understand mountains using standards of human thinking”). Here as well, to the enlightened, typical individuals do not meet because
human ordinariness is “disconnected in the mountains.” Such mountains are everywhere – virtual treasures hidden in the air, in swamps, and in mountains. To Dogen, mountains are a dynamic practice (actualizing enlightenment according to the precise circumstances of the present moment), they are Buddhist reality (an interrelated “universe-as-the-Dharma” [Sanskrit: dharmadhatu]), and they are Buddhas and ancestors teaching the unenlightened in each new moment in every way (“investigate the mountains hidden in 'hiddenness'”).

Dogen immediately divests waters of common human-conceived properties. These are neither wet nor dry, strong nor weak, hot nor cold, still nor in motion, existent nor nonexistent, deluded nor enlightened. Images of water conceived during perception by various beings are included – heavenly beings seeing waters as spectacular flowers and jewelry, dragons and fish seeing waters as palaces and towers, greed-reborn hungry ghosts seeing waters as raging fire, pus, or blood. Waters are not simply the characteristics of its perceived forms (characteristics of element and color, concepts like gravitational flow, evaporation, etc.) to Dogen. He asks how different beings perceiving waters results in different images of the same perception, and if so, where lies the reality of water? (“This should not be investigated only when we see the waters of humans and heavenly beings, this is investigating how waters see waters.”) Waters attract human settlement – and sages and saints; thus, there are many kinds of “catching” – catching fish, attracting followers, catching the Way (Chinese: tao). (“In addition, one should catch the self, one should catch catching, one should be caught by catching, one should be caught by the Way.”) Like mountains, waters practice and authenticate; their Buddhist flowing penetrates what human-conceived waters commonly do not: flames, conceptualizing, memory, discrimination, and the awareness of Buddha-nature. Ordinary properties of water such as its essential nourishment to life, flow, adaptability, permeability, etc. are reinvested to depict the all-encompassing nature of Buddhist teaching as practice. What enables such expansive spiritual influence is the tremendous potential of positive karma resulting from the actualization of enlightenment as a Buddha’s practice of wisdom and compassion. Karma drives the engine of suffering that is the Buddhist ignorant, ever-changing self (Sanskrit anatman), but it is transformed in the Mahayana into strong soteriological capacity as Enlightenment is practiced (this is the Japanese term kudoku that I have rendered as “spiritual power”). Western interpreters often reduce this vision to an impoverished pantheism, animism, animitism, etc., but Dogen’s portrayal of Soto Zen experience as the actualization of one’s inherent Buddha-nature during each new instant of practice dissolves sacred/profane, subject/object, distinct parts/one whole conceptual dichotomies plus typical comprehension of distinct entity time/space conceptual integrity – as he often described his own realization in Song China, a complete “dropping away of body and mind.”

Dennis Lishka

Further Reading
See also: Japanese Love of Nature; Japanese Religions; Sacred Moutains; Zen Buddhism.

MOVE

In the early 1970s, Vincent Leaphart, who later took the name John Africa, began to work out a philosophy of nature that respected all life, even to the point of refusing to repel or eradicate rodents or insects from inhabited buildings. In 1973, he and a group of associates moved into a house near the University of Pennsylvania campus in West Philadelphia, vocally advocating a total separation from the evils of modern society. They took the
name MOVE, which was not an acronym but a word simply chosen to communicate dynamism. In an undated manifesto, members wrote, “MOVE’s work is to stop industry from poisoning the air, the water, the soil, and to put an end to the enslavement of life – people, animals, any form of life.”

MOVE members, mostly African Americans, saw themselves as a radical back-to-nature movement – a “Sierra Club with guns,” as one observer called it. They dressed in blue denim and did not bathe with soap or cut their hair. They rejected hospitals, doctors, and veterinarians. The MOVE women delivered several babies themselves, biting off and eating their umbilical cords and licking them clean. Unvaccinated pets roamed the premises, which were also infested with cockroaches, termites, and rats. Members used loudspeakers in the yard to blare out John Africa’s teachings and denounce, with great vitriol, those who disagreed with them.

The police raided the premises in 1978, arresting several members and bulldozing the wretched house. Those remaining, however, moved to another home and continued as before. After more years of conflict, the police dropped an explosive device onto the house from a helicopter and burned down most of the city block on which the MOVE house was located. Eleven members were killed in the fire and a battle with the police that accompanied the action. A few members survived, but have since avoided public attention. To some radical environmentalists, MOVE has continued to be an important symbol of resistance to consumerist society.

Timothy Miller

Further Reading
See also: Anarchism; Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism; New Religious Movements; Radical Environmentalism.

Mt. Hiei (Japan)

Japanese fondly identify Mt. Hiei (h. 848m) as Hieizan. Hieizan has become a mountain monastic center since Saicho’s (767–822) arrival there in 788 B.C.E. and his carving of a statue of the medicine Buddha, Yakushi Nyorai. The Hieizan monastic complex, Enryakuji, is located between Lake Biwa in Shiga Prefecture and the northeast side of Heian capital Kyoto. Japanese believe that “northeast” is an “inauspicious” direction called “devil’s gate” (kimono) and to prevent dangers entering into the capital, religious specialists were required to perform religious rites there. Thus the purpose of Saicho’s establishment of a monastic complex on the mountain was to protect the emperor and the new capital. The birth of this monastic center serves an important role in understanding the relationship that exists between Buddhism and the Japanese state.

The monastic complex on Mt. Hiei is the headquarters of the Tendai branch of Japanese Buddhism. It was a site of over 3000 temples before Oda Nobunaga’s destruction in 1581 and still contains many temples scattered around the mountain.

As a traditional center of learning, its reputation is attested by the very fact that several Kamakura reformers such as Honen (1133–1212), Eihei (1141–1219), Shinran (1173–1262), Dogen (1200–1253), and Nichiren (1222–1282) who gave birth to several important Japanese Buddhist schools had their initial monastic training in Mt. Hiei.

On Saicho’s return from China in 805, Hieizan became the center of Tendai Buddhism with emphasis on one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra. In addition, its multitude of religious practices historically have embraced a wide range of syncretic rites deriving from Shinto and Japanese native religions. Its complex esoteric practices, the nembutsu, sutra chanting, and meditation, have had a great influence on Japanese religiosity.

For Tendai monks, Mt. Hiei is a place for religious austerity in which seclusion on the mountain is a deep spiritual practice important in developing spiritual insight. Even today, all prospective abbots in Mt. Hiei are required to live in seclusion on the mountain for at least 100 days practicing austerities. As a prominent Buddhist learning center, it still continues to support rigorous monastic practices such as the twelve-year ascetic retreat (rozangyo) and the one-thousand-day mountain pilgrimage (kaihogyo).

The Kaihogyo practice is a daily pilgrimage of a few rare ascetic monks who walk through the forests and hills of Hieizan for 100 days or 1000 days over a period of seven years to perfect themselves to Buddhahood so that they can be vessels of solace for those immersed in the problems of the mundane world, exemplified in busy Japanese city life. Modern ascetic practitioners have followed two ascetic pilgrimage routes extending over 35 kilometers through the hills of Mt. Hiei. Mt. Hiei’s strong association with nature is very clear both in its walking pilgrimage through the hills and the practice of waterfall austerities by ascetic monks such as Sakai Yusai and Hakozaki Bunyo. As an essential part of their pilgrimage, without any religious discrimination, the ascetic monks pray and chant esoteric mantras at 260 Buddhist and Shinto sacred sites including the objects of nature. This practice demonstrates the inclusive nature of the Japanese religious world, which embraces the worship of trees,
Muhammad, The Prophet of Islam

(570–632)

Muhammad, son of Abd Allah, was born in 570 in Mecca, Arabia. He belonged to a noble tribe of Qu‘aysh of the city of Mecca, and was orphaned at an early age. He developed into a sober and responsible young man, known for his trustworthiness. When he received the first revelation, he was forty years old. In the year 622 C.E., the Prophet decided to leave Mecca, where he had lived in some danger. He migrated to Yathrib, later called Madina al-Nabi (The City of the Prophet). A decade later, Muhammad was able to return to Mecca, clear the sacred shrine (Qa‘ba) of idols, and establish worship of the one real God. After his death in 632, his message spread north of the peninsula to North Africa, Spain, and India.

Muslims generally believe that Muhammad is the archetypal true man, representing in his life and person an example all Muslims should aspirre to follow. So, the best example of Islamic environmental awareness, if there is any, may be seen in the life and attitudes of Muhammad toward the environment, which may set an ideal for Muslim generations. Since every good Muslim is expected to emulate the behavior of the Prophet, the following case is a good example of how he changed the worldview of his milieu regarding animals. One of his companions was seen crumbling up bread for some ants with the words, “They are our neighbors and have rights over us” (Johnson-Davies 1994: xvii).

To understand Muhammad’s attitude toward the environment, it is necessary to highlight the Qur’anic Weltanschauung/worldview which provided a comprehensive, integrated, and holistic worldview that is based on the unity of Reality (i.e., 

weltanschauung)

Thus, the purpose of the Qur’an, is “to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and universe” (Iqbal 1958: 8–9). The Qur’an, for example, speaks of trees, gardens, and orchards so frequently that it is not difficult for any attentive reader of the Qur’an to develop an appreciation for them. Since nature is not out there just by accident, as a result of the process of evolution or chaotic configurations, it must have some meaning and purpose. The Qur’an suggests that if any human being ponders over and scrutinizes the very structure of natural phenomena, he/she can deduce the existence of a Creator, who is All-Powerful, All-Knowing, and All-Merciful. Nature reflects, just like a mirror, the power, beauty, wisdom and mercy of its Creator. Therefore, the Islamic worldview does not endorse any view of humanity’s viceregency of the Earth that destroys and spoils the ecological balance of nature.

Muhammad can be seen as the first example of the Qur’anic viceregency. He attached great importance, in his own practice and sayings (hadiths), not only to public worship, civil law, and social etiquette, but also to planting trees, preserving forests, and conserving the environment. The following sayings are instructive in giving clues about his environmental concerns:

If you have a sapling, if you have the time, be certain to plant it, even if Doomsday starts to break forth (Musnad 183–4, 191, III).

There is none amongst the believers who plants a tree, or sows a seed, and then a bird, or a person, or an animal eats thereof, but is regarded as having...
Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam

Muhammad, exemplifying in his personality the Qur'anic viceregency and being a man of Arabian deserts, was aware of the integrity of the ecosystem and the importance of water, greenery, and forests.

On migrating to Medina, Muhammad organized the planting of trees and date groves. He made forests and green spaces conservation areas, where every sort of living creature could live unmolested. Within these “inviolable zones,” which are called sanctuaries (hijma), neither trees, nor shrubs, nor vegetation could be cut, nor could any wild animal be hunted or even disturbed. Around Medina, a strip of land approximately twelve miles wide was proclaimed a sanctuary and made a conservation area by Muhammad. Likewise, he declared other areas, similar to the one in this example, as sanctuaries. Most importantly, when Muhammad established these sanctuaries, he said he was following the example of the prophet Abraham, who declared Mecca a sanctuary. Today these sanctuaries, with the addition of new ones, are still intact.

Muhammad insisted on the protection and kind treatment of animals. He taught with his deeds and sayings that Muslims should act kindly toward all living beings. He said: “The Most Merciful One is merciful towards those who are merciful. Act kindly to those on the earth so that those in the heavens [the angels] will be merciful to you” (Tirmizi, Birr 16). Muhammad commanded that birds’ nests should not be disturbed or the eggs or chicks stolen. He ordered someone who had filled his bag with fledglings stolen from nests, brought to town, to return them to their nests immediately.

Furthermore, he said: “If without good reason anyone kills a sparrow, or a creature lesser than that even, the living creature will put his plaint to God on the Day of Judgment, saying: ‘So-and-so killed me for no purpose’ ” (Nasai, Dahaya 42, VII. 239). He warned Muslims against mistreating animals, “a woman was sent to Hell because she tied up her cat and neither gave it food nor allowed it free to hunt the cockroaches” (Bukhari, Adhan 90 I. 181–2; Muslim, Birr 133, III. 2022). Muhammad tells a story of a man who was walking along a road and felt thirsty. Finding a well, he lowered himself into it and drank. When he came out he found a dog panting from thirst and licking at the earth. He therefore went down into the well again, and filled his shoe with water and gave it to the dog. For this act God forgave him his sins. Muhammad was then asked whether man had a reward through animals, and he replied: “In everything that lives there is a reward” (Bukhari, Musakat 9, III. 77). So, while treating animals well is one means for a person to enter Paradise, mistreatment of animals may be the cause of a person going to Hell. The Prophet banned hunting, especially the arbitrary hunting of animals for pleasure. While hunting is permitted in principle, it might become prohibited depending on the conditions. Islam permits eating meat; however, it gives instructions to ensure humane slaughter, with as little pain to the victim as possible. The main counsel of Islam in the slaughter of animals for food is to do it in the least painful manner.

Another aspect of Muhammad’s environment-related concern is his insistence on private cleanliness. This is considered to be one of the fundamentals of Islamic belief. Muhammad says, “cleanliness is half of belief” (Muslim, Tabarah 1, I. 203). When going to the mosque, to visit someone, or when in the company of others, he was always careful to wear clean and presentable clothes, to rub fragrant scents on his body, and not eat things like onions and garlic, which would have an unpleasant smell.

In spite of Muhammad’s insistence on protecting the environment and exemplary treatment of animals, the signs of environmental crisis can be seen in nearly every Muslim country. One reason may be, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr has argued, the Islamic world is not totally Islamic today and much that is Islamic lies hidden behind the cover of Western cultural, scientific, and technological ideas and practices emulated and aped to various degrees of perfection, or rather one should say of imperfection, by Muslims during the past century and a half (Nasr 1992: 87).

In short, the Prophet Muhammad was very conscious of his environment and developed a spirit of love and care toward the creatures of God. If Muslims examine the life of Muhammad with a “green” eye, they may discover new insights for developing an environmental ethic.

Ibrahim Ozdemir

Further Reading


John Muir was born on 21 April 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland, the first son of a middle-class family that would eventually include seven siblings. While Muir’s mother Ann nurtured him with the delights of backyard flowers, his father Daniel (a lifelong Protestant seeker) expressed his version of Christian love by using scriptural injunction backed by physical punishment to keep the sometimes-headstrong boy from sin. Thus, contrasting currents of maternal affirmation and paternal restriction fueled the child’s own capacities for sensual and imaginative contact with nature, infusing Muir’s escapes to the surrounding Scottish coastline, moors, and hills with a profound and complex religious sensibility.

In 1849, when he was 11, Muir’s family immigrated to America. On the Wisconsin frontier, Muir experienced the beauty and glory – as well as the hardship and danger – of wild nature with a greater intensity than ever before; in the human realm, he learned to balance his father’s increasing harshness with an increased reliance upon his siblings, on the evangelical figure of Jesus as comforter and companion, and on his own sense of personal achievement in his work as farmhand, mechanic, and inventor. Finally leaving home in 1860, at age 22, Muir encountered more liberal strands of nineteenth-century American Protestantism, including a religiously informed openness to modern scientific, evolutionary, and humanistic thought that would inform his outlook throughout his life. Entering the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1861, Muir was introduced by professors such as Ezra Carr to the latest research and theory in disciplines such as geology and chemistry, while Carr’s wife Jeanne stood at the center of a social circle stitched together by the bonds of Christian love – love which was expressed and embodied in the intimacies of everyday domestic life as well as in a shared passion for amateur botany.

By late 1867, when Muir (inspired by explorers such as Alexander von Humboldt) left on a long botanical journey through the American South, he had moved decisively away from conservative Protestantism’s devaluation of nature:

The world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts . . . Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit – the cosmos? (Muir 1997: 825–6)

After falling ill with some unknown fever in Florida, Muir continued his journey not to the Amazon but to California, where work as a sheepherder allowed him ample time to observe the works of God both on the plains and in the mountains. Shaped by increasingly intimate letters to and from Jeanne Carr, Muir’s religious experience of a welcoming nature became ever more sensual and energetic, even erotic, especially after he entered the Yosemite Valley in 1869: “Last Sabbath I was baptized in the irised foam of the Vernal & in the divine snow of the Nevada [falls], and you were there also & stood in real presence by the sheet of joyous rapids beneath the bridge” (Muir in Holmes 1999: 213). His earlier intellectual revaluation of the relationship between humanity and nature broke through to a more bodily, experiential level: “I’m in the woods woods woods, and they are in me-ee-ee!” (Muir in Holmes 1999: 220). Moreover, this communion with nature was an opening into communion with the divine: “I will fuse in spirit skies. I will touch naked God” (Muir in Holmes 1999: 238).

Perhaps understandably, Muir could not sustain in his everyday life the level of naturalistic ecstasy expressed in his letters and journals; as early as 1873 he had moved from Yosemite down to the San Francisco Bay area, where he would live for most of the rest of his life and from which he would take increasingly long botanical and scientific travels throughout California, the West, Alaska, and eventually the world. Casting about for a career during the 1870s, Muir wrote influential geological articles on the glacial origins of Yosemite Valley, travel

Muir, John (1838–1914)

Generations of nature lovers in America and the world have been thrilled and inspired by John Muir’s accounts of his youthful experiences in the mountains of California – swaying atop a storm-blown spruce tree, communing with a favorite plant in the spray of a waterfall, or gazing upon the glories of his beloved Yosemite Valley. Over the same period, Muir’s political career has served as a model of ethical and political commitment to an entire tradition of environmental activists. Both sides of Muir’s life and work – the experiential and the activist – are expressions of a fundamentally religious orientation toward the natural world. Although the exact character of this religiousness has proven difficult for later interpreters to formulate in conceptual terms, the figure of Muir himself continues to serve as an icon of nature religion – a window through which individuals and communities can see their own relationships with nature in a deeper and more profound light.

John Muir was born on 21 April 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland, the first son of a middle-class family that would eventually include seven siblings. While Muir’s mother Ann nurtured him with the delights of backyard flowers, his father Daniel (a lifelong Protestant seeker) expressed his version of Christian love by using scriptural injunction backed by physical punishment to keep the sometimes-headstrong boy from sin. Thus, contrasting currents of maternal affirmation and paternal restriction fueled the child’s own capacities for sensual and imaginative contact with nature, infusing Muir’s escapes to the surrounding Scottish coastline, moors, and hills with a profound and complex religious sensibility.

In 1849, when he was 11, Muir’s family immigrated to America. On the Wisconsin frontier, Muir experienced the beauty and glory – as well as the hardship and danger – of wild nature with a greater intensity than ever before; in the human realm, he learned to balance his father’s increasing harshness with an increased reliance upon his siblings, on the evangelical figure of Jesus as comforter and companion, and on his own sense of personal achievement in his work as farmhand, mechanic, and inventor. Finally leaving home in 1860, at age 22, Muir encountered more liberal strands of nineteenth-century American Protestantism, including a religiously informed openness to modern scientific, evolutionary, and humanistic thought that would inform his outlook throughout his life. Entering the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1861, Muir was introduced by professors such as Ezra Carr to the latest research and theory in disciplines such as geology and chemistry, while Carr’s wife Jeanne stood at the center of a social circle stitched together by the bonds of Christian love – love which was expressed and embodied in the intimacies of everyday domestic life as well as in a shared passion for amateur botany.

By late 1867, when Muir (inspired by explorers such as Alexander von Humboldt) left on a long botanical journey through the American South, he had moved decisively away from conservative Protestantism’s devaluation of nature:

The world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts . . . Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit – the cosmos? (Muir 1997: 825–6)

After falling ill with some unknown fever in Florida, Muir continued his journey not to the Amazon but to California, where work as a sheepherder allowed him ample time to observe the works of God both on the plains and in the mountains. Shaped by increasingly intimate letters to and from Jeanne Carr, Muir’s religious experience of a welcoming nature became ever more sensual and energetic, even erotic, especially after he entered the Yosemite Valley in 1869: “Last Sabbath I was baptized in the irised foam of the Vernal & in the divine snow of the Nevada [falls], and you were there also & stood in real presence by the sheet of joyous rapids beneath the bridge” (Muir in Holmes 1999: 213). His earlier intellectual revaluation of the relationship between humanity and nature broke through to a more bodily, experiential level: “I’m in the woods woods woods, and they are in me-ee-ee!” (Muir in Holmes 1999: 220). Moreover, this communion with nature was an opening into communion with the divine: “I will fuse in spirit skies. I will touch naked God” (Muir in Holmes 1999: 238).

Perhaps understandably, Muir could not sustain in his everyday life the level of naturalistic ecstasy expressed in his letters and journals; as early as 1873 he had moved from Yosemite down to the San Francisco Bay area, where he would live for most of the rest of his life and from which he would take increasingly long botanical and scientific travels throughout California, the West, Alaska, and eventually the world. Casting about for a career during the 1870s, Muir wrote influential geological articles on the glacial origins of Yosemite Valley, travel
articles for local newspapers, and scientific studies of Californian trees; in 1879 he married Louie Strentzel, with whom he had two daughters (Helen and Wanda), soon settling into the life of a farmer in Martinez, California. By the end of the 1880s, financially successful but tired of farming, Muir resumed his literary career with travel writing on the West and Alaska. A pair of articles in Century Magazine in 1890 and 1891 represented his first foray into political waters, in support of federal control of Yosemite Valley; his success in influencing public opinion led to national prominence as a conservationist, through his work as co-founder and president of the Sierra Club, his numerous books and articles popularizing wilderness recreation and protection, and his friendships with important leaders such as Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. However, despite numerous successes in protecting wild nature through the system of national parks and forests and other efforts during the Progressive era, defeats such as the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley for a reservoir in 1913 helped lend an apocalyptic and tragic element to an otherwise confident American conservation movement. Muir died in 1914.

Although undeniably grounded in the Christian Bible and in specifically Protestant theology and piety (both evangelical and liberal), Muir’s nature religion has been interpreted by later scholars in the light of a wide array of ideas and images: Transcendentalism, mysticism, Daoism, Buddhism, pantheism, and others. However one describes it, at the heart of Muir’s religiousness is 1) the importance of direct experience of nature and of the divine – experience that in all cases combines bodily, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual elements. Such experience reveals 2) the ecological interconnections between all beings, as captured in one of his most famous aphorisms: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (Muir 1997: 245). Out of this direct experience of interconnection comes 3) an attitude of reverence toward the world – reverence expressed through the pursuit of scientific knowledge as well as by a joyous humility before the mysterious and the unknown. Such reverence leads Muir to 4) a biocentric worldview, in which all living things, human or non-human, are valued as children of God; indeed, Muir goes further, consistently expanding the bounds of biocentrism to include “inanimate” objects such as rocks and rain as living elements of the divine creation. Finally, Muir reformulates the prophetic spirit of the Old Testament and the moralism of the New into 5) a call and demand for political and personal action on behalf of threatened nature, expressed most fully not in ethical theory but in his own public career as conservationist and activist. Indeed, it has been through his actions as much as his words, his public figure and legend as much as his own writings, that Muir’s legacy has brought these religious elements of direct experience, ecological interconnection, reverence, biocentrism, and activism to an ever-widening audience of environmentalists, nature lovers, scholars, scientists, and politicians.

At the same time, looking beneath the mythic figure, a critical perspective on Muir’s biocentrism reveals an unexpected philosophical and social hierarchy, as his valuation of wild, untouched nature over humanly transformed landscapes was paralleled by a preference for middle-class, white tourists and adventurers over working people and non-white inhabitants. On the one hand, this outlook has served to justify the removal of Native Americans and other indigenous peoples in the process of creating “pure wilderness” out of formerly inhabited landscapes (as in many national parks, such as Yosemite and Yellowstone in the U.S.); on the other hand, Muir’s influence helped allow the American conservation movement to virtually ignore inhabited and working landscapes (such as cities and farms) as objects of environmental concern over most of the twentieth century. Thus, Muir’s wilderness ideals must be understood and critiqued as products of their cultural context at the same time as they may be valued as important and invigorating historical tools in the attempt to forge a larger and better vision of humanity in harmony with nature. Patron saint of modern environmentalism and intellectual forerunner of the philosophy of deep ecology, Muir has been influential beyond these specialized movements in making a religiously grounded appreciation of and concern for wild nature a part of modern society and culture in general, in America and throughout the globe.

Steven J. Holmes

Further Reading
See also: Animism (various); Biocentric Religion – A Call for; Deep Ecology; Miwok People; National Parks and Monuments (United States); Pinchot, Gifford; Scotland; Sierra Club; Wilderness Religion.
Friedrich Max Müller, a German-born linguist who settled in Oxford, England at the age of 26, pioneered the development of comparative Indo-European mythology. A student of the philologist Franz Bopp, the basis of Müller’s approach was the study of the Vedas and the piecing together of etymological identities. He argued that the original proto-Indo-Europeans were “mythopoeic” and could express abstract notions only through analogy. This Romantic view of language conceived primitive speech as not yet having developed a propensity for abstract nouns. Accordingly, the earliest Indo-European Ursprache employed only concrete references – foremost those of natural phenomena. In Müller’s understanding, the sky and sun became the preeminent religious symbols.

Müller argued that the process of myth-making involves a “disease of language” in which metaphors redevelop meaning apart from what they were first used to express. In other words, after the migrations from the Indo-European homelands and the subsequent emergence of separate daughter languages from the parent, the original significances of the names and epithets of the Aryan gods were forgotten and new comprehensions were invented for them. To understand this view from our present perspective, Müller must be placed within the context of nineteenth-century Germany and Victorian Age Britain. Central to the Romantic thought of the time was an alleged intimate original relationship between humanity and nature. Müller’s discovery of a naturalistic base to the original spiritual formulations of European ancestors follows in this line of Romantic reinterpretation. But even today, despite its persistent idealization, nature remains an informing metaphor and foundation for Romantic and quasi- or neo-Romantic positions that oppose the rational and the mechanical when posited as exclusive concerns. In the wider “tug-of-war” between the Greco-Roman foundations of Western civilization, on the one hand, and Judeo-Christian reallocations, on the other, the search for cultural origins has taken root. Müller inaugurated much of this process, although he himself sought to develop a science of religion which, at the end of the day, would find the kernel of “true” religion as distinct from the myths and fables that develop around it.

The chief contemporary criticism of Müller is that a time in which abstraction could only be expressed through concrete metaphors did not exist. The other criticisms include rejections of the notion of a “disease of language” as a biased concept, Müller’s exclusive use of linguistic methodology, and his assumption that the Vedic Aryans were the proto-Indo-Europeans. Though perhaps now entering its twilight period, the current fashion in Indo-European Studies is George Dumézil’s tripartite functionalism that, following Durkheim, denies the validity of any definition of religion in terms of the supernatural and also rejects both “naturalism” and “animism” as providing adequate explanations of religious origins. However, a counter-argument to the Dumézilian rejection of Müller is that Müller is in need of updating rather than dismissal. In Müller’s defense, the professor denied that all mythology has a solar origin. It is instead simply one process among many. While several of the specific Greek-Vedic equations on which Müller’s comparative mythology and presentation of Eurocentric root-spirituality are based are now recognized as faulty and incorrect, new understandings of phonological change nevertheless allow us to appreciate the essentials of the methodology. While the proto-Indo-European may have been fully capable of abstract thought, he/she nevertheless took his/her primary religious metaphors from the natural environment. This reaffirmation of Müller resituates the consideration of Western spirituality as a development from humanity’s earliest interactions with the most prominent elements and rhythms of nature.

Michael York

Further Reading
See also: Anthropologists; Ecological Anthropology; Ecology and Religion; Proto-Indo-Europeans; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; Sun Worship.

Murie, Olaus J. (1889–1963)

Olaus J. Murie was a renowned field zoologist, environmental writer, and wilderness preservationist. As a field scientist he conducted landmark “life history” studies of the Alaskan caribou herds and of the Jackson Hole, Wyoming, elk herd. While doing so, he spent months at a time, over several decades, traveling and living in many remote wilderness areas. He developed a nearly mystical reverence for nature, and an opinion that preserving wilderness was important for the protection of certain animal species that required large acreages of habitat, such as wolves, mountain lions, grizzly bears, elk and caribou. He also came to believe, through his own experience, that wilderness was worth saving for humans to enjoy as a counterpoint to modern civilization.

Murie’s spiritual connection to the Earth and its natural processes was well expressed in a letter he wrote in 1920 to his then-fiancé, Margaret Thomas, while he was following the Denali caribou herd. “I guess I am still
enrolled in the Lutheran Church at home" [Moorehead, Minnesota] he said, “but there is no one creed or church as far as I know with which I fully agree. For one thing, I am crazy about Nature, and almost worship it, but isn’t Nature the direct work of God?” (in Glover 1989: 33).

Murie worked for the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey during the decades when that agency spent millions of dollars on its campaign to eliminate large predators and raptors from North America. Murie was a nearly lone internal dissenter against this campaign. In an argument with a fellow scientist, he wrote,

I am very fond of all our native mammals, amounting almost to a passion . . . I believe the cougar is Nature’s masterpiece in physical fitness. The big cats are infinitely beautiful. The wolf is a noble animal with admirable cunning and strength . . . I would utilize every opportunity to let them live . . . (in Glover 1989: 36).

In 1945, tired of battling the agency he worked for, Murie resigned and became half-time director of the Wilderness Society. In that role he traveled widely around the U.S., showing slides of the American wilderness and its fauna, and urging people to support preservation. In the early 1950s, he led a campaign to preserve the coastal plain and mountains of northeastern Alaska that comprise the range of the Porcupine caribou herd. This resulted in the eventual establishment of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

By this later stage of his career, Murie’s actions and viewpoint might best be described as Taoist (today this is more often translated Daoist), even though he may never have read or heard much about that ancient Chinese tradition. He was acutely aware of the constant flow of natural processes. He believed humans should live in harmony with those processes, and stand in humility before them. Indeed, he saw humility as one of the highest virtues, and constantly advocated its cultivation by both individuals and nations.

What he saw instead was a culture growing increasingly arrogant, especially toward nature. Examples, for Murie, were everywhere: in the effort to do away with “harmful” forms of wildlife, in the construction of enormous dams to “control” wild rivers, in the spraying of chemical pesticides from airplanes all over the cattle country of the west, in the usurpation of wildlands by a rapidly growing military.

Murie was especially opposed to the relatively harmless practice of naming natural features after human beings. Similarly, he opposed the construction of human monuments, especially in places where the much greater power and mystery of natural processes was on display. This resulted in an ironic situation when he died, in the fall of 1963. Admirers wanted to build a rather large monument to Murie in Jackson, Wyoming. His widow, Margaret, had to argue strenuously to prevent them from doing so, knowing that it would violate one of Olaus’ strongest beliefs.

Murie’s religious attitude may best be illustrated by his reaction to a proposal by the National Park Service, in the early 1950s, to build a church on the south rim of the Grand Canyon. The sacredness of that place, he argued, cannot be enhanced by architectural gymnastics. The Grand Canyon and the other beautiful and meaningful dedicated portions of our wonderful earth, should not be cluttered with manmade contrivances . . . And we modern human beings should forget our modern exaltation in material progress and approach the Grand Canyon with humility, in the hope that we can improve ourselves (in Glover 1989: 40).

Further Reading


See also: Conservation Biology; Leopold, Aldo; Marshall, Robert; Wilderness Religion; Wilderness Society.

Music

The power of music to draw us in to states of spiritual openness and oneness with the world of surrounding nature has been known to humanity for thousands of years. Because of its inherent abstraction and allusion to a more pure world of resonances, tones, and frequencies, music has more than any art been understood as inherently sacred, able to lift its listeners and performers up to levels of higher consciousness. If religion is the belief that there are powers beyond our control that help give meaning and purpose to the world, then for many, music is the proof that such powers exist.

There are at least two ways the spiritual power of music can address nature, dependent on the contradictory meanings the word “nature” can have. On the one hand, music can lift us out from and above the mundane particularities of the obvious, base, material world of everyday life, toward some kind of harmony that encompasses inner human essence and the outer physical purpose, holding
the world together and assuring humanity a place within it. The whole thing could be called nature, with "speculative music" our route to inhabiting it correctly. As Athaneseus Kircher (1601–1680) wrote,

The chord of the soul must be aligned with the chord of the Hierarchy, and that of the body with the celestial one of the stars, and you will penetrate the secret of secrets, the absolute knowledge of things divine and human, as St. John says, "You have been anointed by the Holy One, and know all things" [I John 2:20] (in Godwin 1993: 284).

Thus nature has been described as a music of the spheres, all the way back to Pythagoras, some perfect Platonic song that human music or conduct can only aspire to. The more spiritual the music, the closer it is to such heavenly song that human music or conduct can only aspire to. The more widely one observes nature, the more it life more widely, one listens to more and more music, the music which answers the whole universe. Even a piano of a thousand octaves cannot produce the variety that nature represents (in Rothenberg and Ulvaeus 2001: 19).

The music of nature is infinitely greater than anything humanity can measure up to. Hinduism speaks of Nada Brahma – God is Sound, or the World is Sound. As Joachim-Ernst Berendt explains in his book of the same name, "before we make music, the music makes us" (1991: 12). Sound pulses through all of the universe, and through actual and ideal music, humanity can find an artful way into the whole. Alexandra David-Neel met a Tibetan lama on her travels who was a master of sound who told her this: "In the beginning was the wind. This wind sounded, thus it was sound which formed matter. The sound brings forth all forms and all beings. The sound is that through which we live" (Berendt 1991: 178).

The music that is considered spiritual is generally thought to have greater clarity of purpose than mere enjoyment or entertainment. Does this require certain specifically musical qualities? Some identify repetition, solemnity, and intensity as pushing the limits of musicality toward intoxication and trance. Ludwig van Beethoven found his greatest inspiration through walks in the woods. He writes, "My bad hearing does not trouble me here. In the country, every tree seems to speak to me, saying 'Holy! Holy! In the woods, there is enchantment which expresses all things" (in Glesner 2001). His Symphony no. 6, the Pastorale, is his homage to the romantic power of the countryside.

Just as words are transformed into magic syllables in mantra, melodies and harmonies become larger than their musical selves inside spiritual compositions and improvisations. Spiritual music transforms the listener and performer, with the intent of getting us to look beyond ourselves to a greater sense of Oneness. Free jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman says that he has always been guided by “the universal sound, the sound of the universe” (in Berendt 1991: 56). If this unity draws us into the environment around us, not apart from it, then nature is approached, not denied. Listening to the natural world around us is part of the discipline.

Music may imitate nature, learn from nature, but the hardest thing may be to find the best way for humanity to fit into nature. This too is a spiritual quest. A few ethnographies document various cultures with specifically musical views of the universe and the people’s place within it. The Kalapalo of Brazil’s Upper Xingu River sing of times when we were closer to the world: “at the beginning, the Birds’ language was our language. We lived on the Other Side of the Sky” (in Guss 1985: xi). The birds’ language is still like music, while ours has moved away from melody and we have lost the spiritual connection to
nature around us. The Kaluli of New Guinea have a special word for the way their songs and society fit into the surrounding rainforest, dulugu ganalan, “lift-up-over sounding,” the definition of a musical ecology where the highest goal is not something far away, but immediately accessible to those who are prepared to listen.

Their music does not simply define their culture in terms of nature but grounds them very precisely in a particular place. Steven Feld asked the singer Ulahi if the Kaluli learned how to fit their music so well into the surroundings by copying the ornate songs of the forest birds, but she said, “Oh no, they learned from us” (in Feld 1990: 211). (As someone who has learned much from playing music live with birds and insects myself, I have to admit that when contact between species happens this way, I feel much closer to some secret art that resounds across all life forms than before.)

Some traditions preach a kind of ultimate musical humility where we mere human musicians must stop singing and playing in order fully to attend to the more powerful music of the spirits, spheres, or of nature. “You cannot capture God’s choir,” says nature sound expert Bernie Krause, “in a recording” (in Rothenberg and Ulvaeus 2001: 223). Hazrat Inayat Khan eventually had to give up music, because he was called to a higher, more pure and austere life of prayer and devotion. Perhaps the suspicion that music is more fun than spiritual practice should be always lurks inside us even when we succumb to its power.

Common to many visions of the spiritual power of sound is a realization that music possesses us, can sweep over our being to pull us up in its wake toward a place in nature we cannot quite reach but know we must strive for. Gilbert Rouget explains how the music of trance leads the body to take on a whole new identity. If music is deep enough, it cannot be explained. It pushes us forward, toward a better destination. “We sing,” says the Lubavicher Rebbe, “when we have tasted joy and are climbing it to the heavens” (Lubavicher 2001). The Midrash speaks of ten songs of the history of Israel. Nine are in the Bible, but the tenth is still ahead, the “New Song” of ultimate redemption, a redemption that is global and absolute, that will annihilate all suffering, ignorance, jealousy and hate from the face of the Earth, with a completely new musical vocabulary to capture the voice of Creation’s ultimate striving (Lubavicher 2001).

So the perfect music may not be some unattainable ideal, but something humans might, or must find, somewhere still to come. “Listen,” writes composer Pauline Oliveros, “not with your ears, with your blood. Listen! Not with your ears, with your ancestors. Listen! Not with your ears, with your futures” (in Rothenberg and Ulvaeus 2001: 247). This most spiritual of musics will not run from nature, but delve into nature, hear nature, and fit into nature in a way greater than any previous music has yet been able to achieve. The human music that truly enters into nature is still in our future, part of the purpose of progress that we can never quite pin down.

David Rothenberg

Further Reading

See also: Dance; Indian Classical Dance; Music and Eco-activism in America; Music and its Origins; Music of Resistance; Tree Music.

Music and Eco-activism in America

Since music has often served both as a marker of cultural organization and as a means for the dissemination of information and social commentary, it is not a surprise that music has accompanied the growth and organization of environmentalism in the Americas. Since the 1960s,
environmental themes have been tied by musicians to countercultural protest, as in Joni Mitchell’s anthem “Woodstock.” Notions of a “return” to nature and the preservation or protection of the natural environment were reflected in popular music.

By the 1980s, this general compatibility of environmentalism and countercultural music gave rise to the explicit support of musicians who performed benefit concerts and tours for such established environmentalist organizations as Greenpeace. These activities continued throughout the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century; for example, in the early 1990s artists such as U2, REM, Midnight Oil, and Sonic Youth contributed tracks to the Greenpeace album “Alternative NRG.” Other charitable organizations formed alongside and with the cooperation of rock groups, including the Grateful Dead’s Rex Foundation and Phish’s Waterwheel Foundation. Since these organizations were not alliances between musicians and existing external organizations, they reflected the beliefs of the bands and their fans directly, and raised funds for a variety of smaller local environmental causes.

In addition to these forms of interactions, activists themselves have created their own musical forms. In recent decades, radical environmental activist music has proliferated rapidly in the United States. Such music connects the nature religion of this movement with evocative and persuasive artistic expressions. Rooted in and similar to other forms of popular American music, the music of the radical environmental movement is distinguished by its lyric content, but also by its cultural location, and social and spiritual functions. Activist songs spread messages of environmentalism to a wider audience and also teach and reinforce these messages within the community of activists. They serve both to evoke and reinforce proper spiritual perceptions of the natural world but also to convey messages of eco-apocalypticism and the urgency of immediate action.

Just as environmentalism itself springs from diverse streams in American culture, environmental activist music emerges from a number of musical traditions. It is a genre dominated by integrative forms of artistic expression that effectively mobilize an eclectic mix of cultural capital. Such forms are well suited to a movement that values beauty and simplicity, but demands worldly utility and eschews the bourgeois or decadent. Musical influences have included the folk and protest music traditions in the United States. Many traditions that are part of the folk canon in U.S. culture, including old-time fiddle, bluegrass, blues, Cajun/zydeco, and Celtic, have left an audible mark on activist songs. Activists have adopted the community dance setting in which many of these forms of music are played as well.

Overtly religious forms of music, including Native American musical traditions, New Age and neo-pagan songs, and Christian gospel traditions, have also influenced style and content of activist songs. Elements of the hippie aesthetic have been sparingly appropriated, although environmental activists are often critical of perceived escapism in some countercultural musical communities, particularly that surrounding the Grateful Dead. Other cultural traditions from which activist music has drawn include American religious revivalism and political protest movements, including the labor and civil rights movements. More clearly religious forms of environmentalist music have developed in parallel at neo-pagan gatherings and festivals.

The “road shows” that activists, including but not limited to Earth First! activists, undertake to raise consciousness about environmental threats and inspire action against them, are an important means for disseminating the message of radical environmentalism. These shows usually involve performances, musical and otherwise. They aim both to gain supporters on the “outside” of the movement, and to bring new individuals “inside” the movement. But these interests spring from more than a simply political agenda; they evoke and promote a perception of the sacredness of the Earth and its living systems. Activist musician Alice DiMicelle, for example, explained that since “the wilderness is my church,” her role as artist is to bring those attending road shows “experientially into the wilderness” in order to perceive its sacrality (in Taylor 2001a: 227). The road shows combine the practical environmental concerns of the movement with its spiritual orientation in expressive forms that are seen mystically to connect the two.

Expressive forms are also central to the various gatherings of activists that occur regularly; these include regional wilderness meetings, camps, and trainings as well as the larger national “rendezvous.” Among activists, expressive and artistic forms in general and song in particular help reinforce activism and spirituality as well as cement the communal bond between them. While the often light-hearted character of these gatherings is reflected in the songs, rowdiness and joking occur in the context of an assumption that the gatherings are important on both temporal and spiritual levels. Music is central to the fulfillment of these purposes. The themes of radical environmentalism are woven into lyrics and music and provide points of entry for the themes of community and spirituality. Activist music in this context suggests and encourages a spiritually proper perception of wilderness that is connected to a sense of the urgency of radical action.

Well-known environmental activist singer/songwriters include Alice DiMicelle, Danny Dolinger, Robert Hoyt, Timothy Hull, Dana Lyons, Peg Millett, Casey Neill, Jim Page, Joanne Rand, Walkin’ Jim Stoltz, and John Trudell. Stylistically, these artists’ recordings integrate a broad range of eclectic influences into a primarily acoustic setting. Radical activist music contributes to the production
of coherent narratives within which activists’ religious sensibilities and communal needs can be nurtured. The primary contents of their songs frequently address specific environmental issues, and the songs meaningfully tie environmental activism to a broader cultural setting, in terms of the familiar categories “sacred” and “profane.”

Activist songs often fuse environmentalism with overtly religious themes. While the movement is not formally tied to any institutional religion, radical environmentalism encourages a range of pagan or pantheistic spiritualities. Many such traditions are woven together by activist musicians in innovative ways, bringing disparate elements together in a bricolage of previously unassociated elements. An example is Timothy Hull’s “Indigenous Time,” which links environmental activism to respect for native peoples and religions. Another recurring theme in activist songs, popularized by Walkin’ Jim Stoltz, mirrors the common radical environmentalist contrast between “desecrated” destroyed forests and “sacred” intact ecosystems. Casey Neill’s “May Day” leverages the coincidence of the pagan festival Beltane and the international worker’s holiday to create a celebration of joy, deity, physical gratification, and social change. Subtle but effective musical juxtapositions are mirrored by the ideological ones; activist themes are placed beside Pagan ones. In the chorus, Neill claims that their Pagan and activist rejoicing will destroy the political status quo.

Environmentalist songs also juxtapose overtly activist themes with the “everyday” or “profane.” These songs are playful, satirical, and humorous; they contrast activist life with the “mainstream” and place “everyday” things (such as romance, travel, humor) in the context of radical environmentalism. These themes, however, are tied to an eco-apocalypticism that urges immediate, radical action. These clever songs model how “normal” life continues even under radical circumstances and the all-embracing life-changes required by them.

Folksinger/songwriter Danny Dolinger has several such songs, which fuse jovial and clever lyrics on “everyday” topics with a serious activist message, including “If I Had a Dollar” and “Hillbilly Hippie.”

These functions are not necessarily genre-specific. In recent years, as environmental activists have found common cause with activists for human rights and social justice and the anti-war and anti-globalization movements, the music associated with these movements have also found new audiences. As boundaries betweenisms blur, the hip-hop, punk, and electronic music brought into environmentalist circles is understood, as are the movements themselves, to reflect a shared ethos.

Thus, activist song and music occupy several important roles. They serve the vitally important role of community-building. Music also occupies a central place in radical environmentalist ritualizing. The road shows and wilderness gatherings serve a religious function in concretizing and reinforcing spiritual ideals of the community, and connecting them to play, humor, and art. Activist music often seeks to evoke and reinforce a proper spiritual perception of the natural world. The playful interpolation of seemingly disparate ideas, traditions, and aspects of life is part and parcel of expressive and religious life in the movement. Through this process of creative juxtaposition, disparate parts of a difficult activist life are sewn together to make this sort of life cohesive and possible for participants. The “ordinary” parts of life are drawn into the activist world, and the activist world is normalized for its participants. At the same time, however, the urgency of radical environmental action is stressed by the themes of eco-apocalypticism. These forms of artistic freedom and innovation in the music reflect and are a product of the movement’s critique of capitalism and power structures. Further, the musicians understand their music to be one form of their activism and their most important contribution to the community.

Masen Uliss

Further Reading


See also: Diggers and Levelers (and adjacent, Diggers Song); Drums, Drumming, and Nature; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Music of Resistance; Music and its Origins; Radical Environmentalism; Tree Music.

Music and its Origins

The origins of human-created music, and perhaps language itself, can be traced to the mimicry of bird songs and animal sounds. One of the oldest artifacts ever discovered is a bone whistle, found in a cave in northern Spain. Rhythm is likely an innate quality, sequenced to the
cycles of day and night, the four seasons, fulfillment and hunger. Thus even the most synthetic modern music has indisputable roots in the natural world, and in human-kind’s capacity for empathy and expression, wonder and delight. Music was a way to preserve and pass down information prior to the advent of writing, and for tens of thousands of years it has served as a means for enhancing religious sensibilities and spiritual states.

The Lilloets of southern British Columbia sang a deep lament over the body of any bear killed, thus winning, they believed, the continued favors of the bear people. The Ona of Tierra del Fuego, on the far southern tip of South America, believed that a child who sings in its sleep or a teen who breaks unconsciously into song will become a shaman. To this day music remains an integral component of the spiritual teachings and practices of most indigenous, land-based peoples. The White Mountain Apaches have songs for every season and situation, as well as for essential social and religious rituals. These include planting and harvest songs, songs for birth and death, victory and courtship, the onset of puberty, the honoring of cronehood, and shamanic rites. The Aboriginal peoples of Australia navigate the overlapping natural and spiritual landscapes by following “songlines,” auditory guide maps made up of ancestral place-based compositions, performed at each point along the way.

Shamans from Ecuador to Siberia use music as a transportive vehicle, arresting rational thought and suspending “imagined separation.” Their power songs are intended to put them in touch with their magical allies, and chants and drumbeats assist their journey through the spirit world, to function as an aural bridge between what is known and what can be. The result of this connectedness can be enhanced sensitivity, lucid dreaming, “intrasensory perception” and clairvoyance. In this condition they access the wisdom of the ancestors and the gifts of the spirits, returning to normal consciousness with crucial prophecies and cures. Tuvan throat-singing and Vietnamese Buddhist chants share a common purpose, putting the singer in deeper contact with the experience and reality of spirit.

Similarly, music continues to be employed to help people get out of their “left-brain” minds and into the intuitive, responsive self away from what many participants in Western civilization see as a paradigm of artifice, and “back to nature.” Hand-carved flutes are played reverently by hikers in the wilderness, while back in the city altered states are encouraged by the rhythmic trance dancing popularized by groups like Gabrielle Roth & The Mirrors. Singing and drumming are core elements of women’s circles and covens, as well as men’s groups inspired by the archetypal Green Man or the works of writers like Robert Bly. Drum circles provide a sense of sacred space and communality for the several thousand “brothers and sisters” of the counterculture Rainbow Tribe, and they often use a drum to announce important councils at their gatherings. Chants (or “rounds”) strengthen the communities and empower the rituals of contemporary Earth-worshipping Pagans (Wiccan, Neo-druid, Gaian, Pantheist).

Some of the most emotive Western classical pieces have been inspired by or are meant to evoke the color, drama or peace of the natural world, such as “The Grand Canyon Suite” and “Four Seasons.” Mendelssohn tried to capture the sound of the ocean surf in his “Fingal’s Cave,” and the flute parts in Vivaldi’s “Goldfinch” were written to approximate the sounds of the birds themselves. Attempting the same effect are the various examples of modern atmospheric or “New Age” music, usually combining recorded nature sounds such as rain, surf and bird song with electronic washes. The use of synthesizers in “environmental music” has been criticized by a number of academics and musicians including the Greek pianist Sakis Papadimitriou:

Today, playing the flute, congas, piano, saxophone, becomes an ecological protest. Sound emerges from within the musical instruments, directly from their source. And you hold this source in your hands, in your lap, in your arms, around your neck. Vibrations warm you. The sound touches you. It is not coming at you from a different, distant and mechanical point. Synthesizers do not emit music. They are faulty. They do not vibrate. The sound takes a digital walk first and then jumps into the loudspeakers. These sounds are ignorant of the earthly environment. They do not possess the elementary quality of surviving in Nature (Lone Wolf Circles 1991).

While a large percentage of environmental music is relaxing, some is intended to stir its listeners to action instead. In North America, following the example of civil rights and anti-war activists, the biocentric singer-songwriters such as “Walkin’ Jim” Stoltz, Dana Lyons, Joanne Rand and Darryl Cherney helped to reinvigorate the American environmental movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Anglo eco-activist Lone Wolf Circles joined Native American John Trudell in performing spoken-word poetry to live world beat and rock music. On “Tribal Voice” Trudell chants to the beat of a tom-tom, “The generations surge together to meet the reality of power. Mother Earth embraces her children in natural beauty, to last beyond oppressor’s brutality,” and more simply, “Without Earth, there is no heaven.” Born of rebellion and protest, Rock and Roll has contributed a few eco-paeans including the 1960s hit “In The Year 2525” and Barry Maguires’ “Eve of Destruction,” with their decidedly environmental message. In 1970 the group Spirit sang “It’s nature’s way of telling you something’s wrong, it’s nature’s way of telling you with a song.” In the 1990s the California family band Clan Dyken took their mix of socially conscious rock and
reggae on the road with a mobile solar-powered stage, raising funds for the protection of remnant old-growth redwoods. Both the Canadian Bruce Cockburn and Georgia-based Indigo Girls have incorporated Native American spiritual sensibilities in pieces performed live, in tours spotlighting environmental and native rights issues.

The commercial country music of the 1930s–1950s often waxed sentimental about beautiful western landscapes and wide-open spaces, but within twenty years had developed a rock flavor and began catering to a largely urban audience. Country superstar John Anderson nonetheless contributed several environmental pieces addressing ecological concerns, and his “Seminole Wind” evokes a spiritual dimension in its paean to the vanishing Florida Everglades. In the 1970s Charlie Daniels sang about “The Last Lonely Eagle” passing over fields of destruction below, endlessly circling without a single standing forest left to land in. In “Coyote” new traditionalist Don Edwards laments the disappearance not only of old-time outlaws and Indians, but also the red wolf, the noble buffalo and the ineffable spirit of the land.

American Country music is derived in part from the Celtic ballads brought over by the English and Irish immigrants of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Scotch and Irish in particular came with a rich history of songs intended to deepen its people’s connection, loyalty and devotion to the land that sustains them. In albums including Real Estate and Indigenous the popular Celtic folk musician Dougie Maclean celebrates sense of place in original pieces about what it means to belong, as true “care-takers” of the Earth. A continent away Geoffrey Oryema of the Ivory Coast writes songs that honor Africa’s soulful countryside, and the Sami songstress Mari Boine calls forth the spirits of her Nordic land. The Aboriginal’s connection to nature comes across strong in songs by native Australian Archie Roach, whose albums like MacLean’s, Boine’s and Oryema’s are now distributed worldwide.

Not all examples of music, of course, move one closer to the meaning or experience of nature. Those that do tend to reform the ways in which we hear, define and relate to the natural world. Rather than substituting for nature, they draw the listener outside and into direct engagement with the more-than-human world. Of special interest are acoustic compositions recorded outside in a natural setting, such as those by jazz musicians Paul Winter, James Newton and Paul Horn. On the albums Prayer for the Wild Things and Canyon, Winter plays not over the sounds of nature but with them, enjoying an active melodic exchange with wind and willow, river and raven. With his project “Interspecies Communication” activist and musicologist Jim Nollman has taken this cross-species interaction one step further, employing music as a common language for the sharing of emotion and information between humans and other animals, especially orcas. In this way not only is the intelligence of cetaceans affirmed, but so also is the human penchant to reach out and connect through the “magic” of music.

Every expression of nature offers instruction as well as inspiration, setting an example of authentic and undiluted being. Like the echolocation of whales and dolphins, the sharing of music is a way of probing the world for like-minded and like-hearted individuals, for sustenance, reciprocity and insight in a practice that ethnomusicologist Charlie Keil calls “deep echology.” Being consciously “at one with the Earth” is compared to adjusting our pitch for perfect harmony, as people of every race and culture seek to find their part in the greater earthen song.

Jesse Wolf Hardin

Further Reading
See also: Drums, Drumming, and Nature; Music; Music and Eco-activism; Music of Resistance; Pagan Music; Winter, Paul.

Music of Resistance

Humankind has long rallied to evocative religious and secular music, from the chants of our ancestral cave dwellers or a melodic prayer for alignment with the spirits of nature to the arboreal anthems at the close of the twentieth century, emboldening a community of tree-sitters obstructing highway construction in some of England’s most revered hardwood groves. While music has been employed by ruling states to unite their populations around a particular vision of patriotism and comportment, the protest movements that inevitably rise to oppose the status quo use the mood and metaphor of song to excite reconsideration and resistance. For both, music proves a powerful means of defining a shared group identity, deepening solidarity, evoking emotion and inspiring response. Whether a martial composition or a softly sung
In the summer of 1988, 24 Earth First! protesters blockading a logging road in the Kalmiopsis Forest, Oregon, U.S.A., were rounded up and placed in the back of a paddy wagon with barred windows. Rather than being taken at once to the jail, they were left in their sweltering confines to watch the falling of the giant old-growth fir trees they had come to protect. One by one they joined in singing the few words they remembered of an old protest song popularized by performers such as Walkin' Jim Stoltz and Si Kahn, “There is power, there is power, in a band of folks who care . . .” The vehicle rocked back and forth as they sang louder and louder, the music not so much a healing balm as fuel to keep their struggle and hopes alive.

Forty years earlier, the women of certain villages in Northern India banded together to stop the cutting of remnant Himalayan forests, chanting their sacred songs as they climbed the slopes to confront the government loggers. In statements they cited not only the increasing erosion and floods, and their dependence on a continuous supply of firewood, but also the offense to the Devas: spirits embodied in the threatened trees, as in all living things. They placed themselves at grave risk as they threw their arms around the trunks, their songs rising above the cacophony of saws. In this way, their growing forest protection campaign became known as the “Chipko” movement, a word meaning literally “to embrace.”

From “I Feel the Forests,” on Oregon native Cecelia Ostrow’s 1985 album:

There is a power dwelling in this land, a power deep as it is old,
Now you remember when you cut these trees,
    that spirit cannot be bought or sold.
I feel the forest swaying over me,
I feel the flowing mountain streams,
I smell the forest’s breezes sweet and pure –
    and I start to remember who I am.

The kinds of people who risk their credibility, jobs, freedom and even lives in defense of the last wild places are almost without exception inspired by more than the escalating extinction of species worldwide. While they may not always classify it as spiritual, they usually act out of a deep bond with the more-than-human world dating back to some formative childhood experience. Their pain is rooted in the loss or denigration of those childhood playgrounds, the places of refuge and belonging, the sources of their sensitivity, interdependency and epiphany.

“That townhouse used to be my tree fort” the eco-activist Dana Lyons sings on his album “Animal” in a song with the apocalyptic title “Time Bomb”: “That highway used to be the wood. That building used to be the beach. That brown haze used to be the sky. Oh say goodbye!”

Lyric metaphor and melodic inference can help focus one’s attention on their relationship to the natural world. Even more so, active listening and singing-along are integrative practices that connect a person in an immediate way to their physical and spiritual environs. Even singing songs that make no mention of the natural world can contribute to one’s engagement through the transcendence of the intellect, the awakening of bodily senses and the stirring of the feeling heart. Songs with decidedly non-spiritual lyrics, or with no words at all, can nonetheless lead to individual and group experiences that are essentially spiritual in nature.

In the ecosophy and music of the environmental movement, human political concepts such as dignity and freedom have been broadened to include the more-than-human world, the fabric of life and non-life that make up the interactive Gaian whole. In this way, a new contemporary culture has been developing with a musical intentionality and religiosity more akin to their early indigenous counterparts than what they often refer to as “the dominant paradigm.” Many of the most radical environmental activists in the U.S. and abroad have been motivated by “deep ecology” and the various strains of paganism and “New Age” spirituality, in which the natural world is held to have not only a practical and evolutionary worth but also an intrinsic sacred value as well. Regardless of lyric content, music employed in the struggle to save what are held to be sacred lands and inspired species could be said to serve a liturgical function.

In the 1980s and 1990s, American eco-troubadors performing on the environmental and college circuit included Joanne Rand, Alice DiMicele, Walkin’ Jim Stoltz, Greg Keeler and Katie Lee. The political implications and outright danger that green performers face was driven home by what may have been the attempted assassination of Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney, when a pipe bomb exploded beneath them while they were driving to their next performance in the bay area of Northern California. The notable Australian activist and musician John Seed, co-founder of the Australia-based Rainforest Information Centre, spoke about the importance of an eco-centric (Earth-centered) spirituality while touring around the world raising money for the very practical purpose of rainforest preservation.

In 1985, I launched the first of 24 “Deep Ecology Medicine Show” tours, encouraged by Dave Foreman, co-founder of the radical environmental movement Earth First! Like earlier EF! road shows (featuring Foreman, Mike Roselle and Bart Kohler) the Medicine Shows were politicized rallies incorporating both live topical music and motivational speeches. Both were intended to gather new adherents to the cause of wilderness preservation,
often resulting in the formation of new groups around local issues, or civil disobedience “direct actions” the day after a show. The Medicine shows differed in two fundamental ways: the various musicians and bands performed pieces with me rather than separately, symbiotically dramatizing my stories, provocations and prayers. We blended overtly emotive and spiritual elements into the shows endeavoring to create a tribal experience for a caring and sensitized audience. University and community center performances characteristically began and concluded with prayer, often contributed by Native American, Buddhist and other spiritual teachers drawn from the regions we traveled through. During these performances a hand came forward and played, and my words were set to some jazz improvisation, bracketed between Country Western stanzas, propelled by a reggae skank, or buoyed by the lilt of a Syrian love song. In these performances I spoke of a litany of extinct plants and animals and by the lilt of a Syrian love song. In these performances provided wilderness fundamental revival, a deep ecology Chautauqua proffering Gaian canticles and performances provided a paean to those in danger of being lost, while teasing the audience with tales of my canyon home. These performances provided a paean to those in danger of being lost, while teasing the audience with tales of my canyon home. These performances provided wilderness fundamental revival, a deep ecology Chautauqua proffering Gaian canticles and melodic manna for the would-be heroes of a wilder Earth.

There may be no more dramatic an example of the religious dimensions of eco-activist music than the “Tribal Jams,” a long-time component of the Sage Brush Rally, at the annual Earth First! Round River Rendezvous. Following a host of speakers, humorists and performers, the Tribal Jam redirected the energy of those gathered – toward heightened presence, primal mindfulness, sentience, sense of place, and a palpable experience of an inclusive, Earth-embodied Spirit/God. During these rallies the crowd of professors and litigants, students and outlaws, often doff their clothes, paint one another’s faces with red-mud war paint, and hoot and howl like the owls and wolves they spend much of their lives trying to save.

“Ease out of your minds,” I would urge them, “and down into your intuitive, instinctual animal bodies.” Anchored by archaic drum rhythms and colored with flute and guitar, an incantation floats out of the speakers and over and through them, as clouds of mountain dust rise moon-bound from beneath the dancers’ busied feet. I chant to chant down the walls, chant open the hearts, chant us all back to authentic self and a whole-ly healed planet.


Jesse Wolf Hardin

Further Reading


See also: Deep Ecology; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Music and Eco-activism; Pagan Music; Tree Music.

Mutu and African Healing

Mutu (spelling variation Muthu) is a word describing a range of practices connected with the medicinal use of plants, animals, and occasionally humans in African and African-derived religions. It is one of the most widely known, yet misunderstood, concepts.

The word “muti” comes from the Zulu peoples of South Africa and originally means “medicine.” This is important, because some of the negative associations of muti reported in recent years tend to ignore that, in itself, muti is a morally neutral practice, although there are ethical issues surrounding the extraction methods of plant and animal material.

In essence muti centers on the belief that many plant and animal parts have intrinsic power. This power can be harnessed through the careful preparation of potions and medicines. Thus, certain plants are believed to have special powers, and usually particular plants will be associated with different types of curative power. Likewise, the use of certain body parts may be associated with the healing of different types of illness. The power may be used for either good or bad purposes depending on the intention of those making, or commissioning, the particular medicine.

Some of the ingredients in muti are said by allopathic curers to have proven healing properties. *Prunus Africana* is believed to help the prostate; *Ocotea bullata* (black stinkwood), a drink, steam bath or general tonic is used for a whole range of skin problems; *Agathosma betulina* (buchu), is given as a diuretic and antiseptic; and the *Hypoxis* family is used to boost the immune system. Some pharmaceutical companies have been in running disputes with traditional healers over muti “patents,” with the latter...
Muti killings (variation “Muthi”) are those in which the victim has died as a result of the extraction of body parts for medicine or “muti.” Thus a muti killing normally differs from cases of sacrifice, in which the purpose of the murder is a propitiation, or offering, to a deity or ancestor.
While there may be overlaps in some of the practices, the key aspect of a muti killing is that it is one in which the killing occurs as a by-product of the primary intent to extract body parts for medicine.

Just as certain plants are believed by practitioners of African and African-derived religions to have innate powers, so too it is believed that certain animal, and even human, body parts have intrinsic power. Their extraction for use in muti is therefore routinely practiced in South Africa, and elsewhere in African and African-derived religions. However, it is important to differentiate between several different issues here.

The removal of animal and human body parts for muti after they are already dead from other causes may raise ethical issues, but is not killing for muti per se. Many of the body parts on sale in muti markets in South Africa have been acquired in this way, and there is evidence of “black market” activity around morgues and crematoriums.

However, practitioners of muti more frequently believe that the provenance of their medicine is of importance to its empowerment. It is unusual, though not unknown, for muti to be extracted from older or ailing victims, while conversely, the young and healthy make for prime candidates. Among the animals there are favorite candidates: primates and the big cat family are at the top of the list.

Similarly, it is widely believed that the removal of parts while the victim is still alive renders the medicine more powerful. This is partly to be explained as “keeping the medicine fresh.” But it is also because some believe that the screams of the victim empower the medicine. There are several gruesome cases, mainly in South Africa, where the extraction of body parts has taken place over several hours while the victim remained alive throughout. Some victims have thus been discovered missing parts of their anatomy, yet still alive. In one particularly brutal case in the Transkei province a woman was skinned alive and her genitals, breast, feet, and hands were removed all while she was kept alive (she died later). The body parts in this case were intended for empowerment in fertility and sexual healing. In many cases parts are sold off to different customers – each buying a part that relates to their own particular need for empowerment. Contract muti killings are not unknown – the murder of an innocent victim as part of a commissioning of certain body parts.

Some body parts are believed to be more powerful than others. It is normal, though not always the case, that genitals will be removed. Similarly, the eyes, parts of the brain, finger nails, hair, and internal organs such as the top vertebra, the heart, and spleen are all highly prized for muti.

While there may be overlaps with instances of sacrifice, it is important to recognize that in the latter the victim is usually killed quickly and the central empowerment occurs through the blood, rather than the body parts, the pouring of which acts as a libation to an ancestor or deity. Sacrifice of animals in this way is routinely practiced throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

The killing of human beings, whether for sacrifice or muti killing, is regarded by the majority of practitioners as a deviation of African religious practices, and the vast majority of Africans utterly condemn this. It is likewise important to remember that deviants kill in the name of religion in all cultures. But this does not mean it never occurs in African and African-derived religions. The 2001 discovery of the torso of a young West African boy in the River Thames, London, led police officers through cultural advice to the extraordinary realization that he had been sacrificed as part of a ritual killing. Such sacrifices are relatively frequent in parts of West Africa. Muti killings meanwhile remain relatively common in South Africa, with some estimates stating that as many as 300 occur every year. With HIV and AIDS infection rates soaring in many parts of Africa, life is deemed to be cheap. In addition, unscrupulous healers often proclaim miracle cures for life-threatening illnesses such as AIDS by the use of muti.

Richard Hoskins

See also: African Religions and Nature Conservation; Muti and African Healing; Zulu (amaZulu) Culture, Plants and Spirit Worlds.

Mutwa, Credo (1921–)

Attending an international conference on transpersonal psychology in Kyoto, Japan, during 1985, the great Zulu shaman, Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa, began his plenary address by remarking that he was delighted to be among people who revered mountains, because he was so fat that he was often mistaken for one. In this humorous observa-
tion, Credo Mutwa indicated not only that he was familiar with a recurring feature of Japanese folk religion but also that he felt a certain sense of solidarity with indigenous Japanese religious life. As he later explained, the Zulu and Japanese languages share many common words. The two languages supposedly have a cognate vocabulary, which enabled his wife to communicate effectively by speaking Zulu to Japanese shopkeepers. According to Mutwa, this shared vocabulary ultimately pointed to an underlying commonality of indigenous religion, whether that religion was referred to in Japanese as Shinto, “the way of the gods,” or in Zulu as Sintu, “the way of man.” By preserving their indigenous religion, the Japanese had established a model for the Zulu, according to Credo Mutwa, that would “make the black people of our culture as respected and powerful as the Japanese.”
As guardian of tribal traditions, Mutwa had the responsibility of preserving the Zulu past. But he also claimed to know the future. At the 1985 conference in Kyoto, Credo Mutwa indicated that the future was in the stars. Asked to explain the significance of a bronze object he wore around his neck, Mutwa recounted, “in Africa we have a tradition that there are extraterrestrial intelligences watching the Earth. Do you not have reports in Japan of what are called ‘Flying Saucers’...?” According to Mutwa, aliens from outer space, known in Zulu as abahambi abavutayo, the “fiery visitors,” featured prominently in the myths and legends of Zulu tradition. With increasing frequency, these extraterrestrial beings in flying saucers were visiting the Earth. Mutwa explained the significance of his necklace: “These ritual ornaments are the signs of the spiritual contact with humanity, emerge, they will know the right person to talk to!” (Mutwa 1996: xiv, 163, xxix, xv–xvi).

By his own account, Credo Mutwa – guardian of Zulu tradition; shaman, teacher, and healer of Africans; and prophet of the world’s future – was exactly the right person.

The case of Credo Mutwa raises a crucial problem in the study of folk religion, the problem of authenticity. I have no intention of solving this problem. Instead, I want to think about some of the processes through which authenticity is produced, appropriated, and mobilized under the sign of folk religion, popular religion, or indigenous religion. In other words, I want to highlight the dilemma of artificial authenticity in the study of folk religion, and in so doing, will illustrate some ways in which nature is deployed in the service of authenticity.

Although folk religion might be regarded as a residual category, designating relations with gods, spirits, and sacred places that are left over when “world religions” have been factored out of the religious landscape, the very category of folk religion was produced out of a range of intellectual interests in the authenticity of the primitive, the savage, or the exotic. As historian of religions Charles Long has demonstrated, the notion of folk, popular, or indigenous religion has carried an aura of authenticity because it evokes the organic religious life of the rural peasantry rather than the urban citizenry, the lower class rather than the elite, the ordinary people rather than the clergy. In the process of its production as a category, however, folk religion was appropriated, reproduced, and arguably reinvented by urban, literate elites within modern societies to lend an aura of authenticity to emerging nationalisms. These “invented traditions” transformed folklore into “fakelore” in the service of national interests.

In the study of religion we occasionally have to confront outright frauds. During the eighteenth century in London, for example, the literary conman, George Psalmanaazar, produced an entirely fake account of the society, culture, and religion of the island of Formosa. As anthropologist Rodney Needham argued, the temporary success of this fraud can be explained by the fact that Psalmanaazar managed to make his fake account of the religion of Formosa look very much like a recognizable religion, or at least a religion that would fit expectations of an “exotic” religion among his readers in England. Such productions of authenticity require a careful mediation between extraordinary accounts, which cannot be independently confirmed or disconfirmed, and ordinary expectations about the primitive, the savage, or the exotic.

In this work of mediation, successful frauds in the study of religion have acted as intercultural brokers speaking in the name of silent partners who bear the burden of authenticity. In some cases, these intercultural mediations of authenticity are relatively easy to expose as fraudulent, as in Eugen Herrigel’s representations of the Zen Master Kenzo Awa or Carlos Castanada’s account of the Yaqui shaman Don Juan Matus. Both are transparently fake. In other instances, however, the mutual complicity of reporter and informant in the production of indigenous authenticity has made the exposure of fraud extremely difficult if not impossible. If we critically review the exchanges between John Neihardt and Black Elk or between Marcel Griaule and Ogotemelli, for example, we have to conclude that these accounts of indigenous religion were produced out of specific intercultural mediations rather than through any extraordinary, unmediated access to authentic Sioux or Dogon religion.

Against this background, Credo Mutwa poses an extremely difficult problem. Speaking for himself, as well as for Africa, Credo Mutwa asserts an indigenous authenticity that has been acknowledged all over the world. In his native South Africa, however, he has often been described in the popular media as a fake, a fraud, and a charlatan. “He has been called an old fraud, a charlatan,” journalist Angela Johnson observed (Johnson 1997). Alluding to Mutwa’s complicity with apartheid, the apartheid regime of the National Party, and apartheid structures of South African Bantustans, journalist Hazel Friedman reported that Credo Mutwa has been widely regarded as “a charlatan and opportunist who consorted with the enemy” (Friedman 1997). Within South Africa, therefore, Credo Mutwa has not always represented indigenous authenticity. In fact, when he has not been entirely ignored, Mutwa has primarily appeared in popular media stories about his failed predictions as a false prophet who nevertheless continues to predict the future. But how does such a fake produce real effects in the real world? How has Credo Mutwa emerged globally, if not locally, as the supreme bearer of South African indigenous authenticity?

During the 1990s Credo Mutwa was celebrated not only as a Zulu shaman but also as an environmentalist, healer, prophet, teacher, and authority on aliens from outer space.
The new religious space opened up by the internet has been crucial to this development. On his own website, he appears in cyberspace as “Credo Mutwa, A Small Ray of Hope for Africa.” On many other websites, however, he appears as one of the world’s most important shamans, the High Sanusi of the Zulu nation of South Africa. In what follows, I review the historical production of this indigenous authenticity.

**African Origins**

Born in 1921 in the South African province of Natal, Credo Mutwa grew up in a household that was religiously divided between his father’s Roman Catholicism and his mother’s adherence to African traditional religion. In 1935 his father converted to Christian Science, the American church founded in the nineteenth century by Mary Baker Eddy, who understood God as “Divine Mind” responsible for healing the body, mind, and spirit. Undergoing a serious illness, Mutwa was forbidden conventional medicine in keeping with the avoidance of modern medical practice among Christian Scientists. Instead, his father read to him from the book *Science and Health*, by the “American holy woman” (Mutwa 1996: 3). Rejecting his father’s “holy woman,” Mutwa turned to his mother’s family during his crisis. Under their tutelage, he learned that his illness was not an illusion, as the teachings of Christian Science held, but an entry into a new and special role within African indigenous religion. As Mutwa later recalled, his initiatory sickness signaled his calling to become a *sangoma*, an indigenous healer, diviner, and seer.

In 1954 Credo Mutwa found employment in a curio shop in Johannesburg that specialized in providing African artifacts for the tourist market. Mutwa’s employer, A.S. Watkinson, relied upon him to authenticate these objects of African art. Besides developing detailed interpretations of the meaning of African artifacts, Mutwa emerged as a gifted and imaginative storyteller, recounting elaborate tales that he insisted were drawn from the authentic repository of Zulu tribal history, legends, customs, and religious beliefs. Sponsored by Watkinson and edited by A.S. Brink, an academic with the Institute for the Study of Man in Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand, a collection of Credo Mutwa’s stories was published in 1964 under the title, *Indaba, My Children*. A second volume, *Africa Is My Witness*, was published in 1966. As editor Brink explained, the term, *indaba*, referred to a Zulu tribal council at which different views were presented “to have their authenticity or acceptability evaluated” (Mutwa 1964: xv). Ostensibly, therefore, Mutwa’s stories were presented to the reading public to test their authenticity. In making such an assessment, however, the historical and ethnographic record provided no help, since the wild, extravagant, and imaginative poetry and prose of these texts bore little if any relation to anything previously recorded in print about Zulu religion. Nevertheless, rendering his own judgment, Brink advised that these tales were authentic because they revealed the “strange workings of the mind of the African” (Mutwa 1964: xv). Three decades later, reviewing the British republication of *Indaba, My Children*, Randolph Vigne could only agree that the entire point of Credo Mutwa’s account of Zulu tradition seemed to be “to project an African culture wholly alien to and unassimilable with any other, least of all that of the Europe-descended millions who share South Africa” (Vigne 1999).

This construction of indigenous authenticity certainly fits with the tribalism of apartheid during the 1950s and 1960s. Under the auspices of its policy of separate development, the ruling National Party tried to create new African nations, with their own traditions, histories, languages, cultures, and religions, which would reinforce the establishment of separate homelands or Bantustans that were geographically within the territory of South Africa but legally outside of the Republic of South Africa. In the case of Zulu nationalism, the Department of Native Affairs, under the direction of apartheid ideologue H.F. Verwoerd and anthropologist W.M. Eiselen, sponsored the first Shaka Day in 1954 to celebrate Zulu tradition. They convinced the Zulu King Cyprian to dress up in a traditional costume of leather loin covering, leopard skin, feathers and beads that neither Cyprian nor his father, King Solomon, had ever worn before. For this recovery of tradition, they had to refer to an illustrated book about Africans that had been published in 1855. In this context, indigenous authenticity was constructed as a tribal continuity with a traditional past that allegedly prevented Africans from integrating into modern South Africa.

Although Credo Mutwa has claimed to have an “unashamedly unpoliticized conscience,” his writings in the 1960s clearly reinforced apartheid, a political system that legally excluded all black Africans from citizenship within the Republic of South Africa, but incorporated them as exploitable labor. Like the architects of apartheid in the National Party, Mutwa argued that apartheid was not racial discrimination but racial separation that was consistent with divine and natural law. “Discrimination is to distinguish and decide which is best,” Mutwa wrote. “Apartheid is to distinguish without deciding which is best” (1966: 318). Insisting that Africans in South Africa actually wanted apartheid and were not interested in equal rights, Mutwa declared, “Apartheid is the High Law of the Gods! It is the highest law of nature!” (1966: 319). Racial integration, according to Mutwa, “is as abhorrent as extermination” (1966: 319). Praising H.F. Verwoerd, who by then had become president of South Africa, Credo Mutwa maintained that the

White men of South Africa are only too right when they wish to preserve their pure-bred racial identity.
And what is good enough for them is good enough for us, the Bantu... Separate Development... is the clearest hope that the Bantu have thus far had” (Mutwa 1966: 323).

Under apartheid, Verwoerd’s National Party promised to protect independent African homelands from “Communists or militant Bantu rebellion-mongers” such as the African National Congress (ANC). Into the 1980s, Mutwa continued to lend his support to the apartheid regime, even writing the foreword to a book published in 1989 arguing that the United States should not impose sanctions on South Africa. Instead, the U.S. should embrace South Africa and consider making the country its fifty-first state. As he argued in the 1960s, Mutwa insisted that such protection would save Africans from communists, militants, or rebels such as “the ANC terrorists” (1989: 13).

Under the apartheid regime of the 1960s or the neo-apartheid regime of the 1980s, Credo Mutwa was only concerned that Africans should be free to preserve their distinctive tribal customs and their traditional way of life.

In his publications of the 1960s, Credo Mutwa declared himself the guardian of Zulu tribal tradition. Referring to himself as a Zulu witchdoctor, Mutwa related a bewildering array of traditional tales, which Mutwa himself characterized as “a strange mixture of truth and nonsense,” showing a remarkable facility of literary invention. Mutwa’s presentation drew its authority from a careful balance of transparency and secrecy. On one hand, Mutwa claimed that he was relating common African folk traditions, the familiar “stories that old men and old women tell to boys and girls seated with open mouths around the spark-wreathed fire in the center of the villages in the dark forests and on the aloe-scented plains of Africa” (1964: 429). If this assertion were true, then the authenticity of these stories could presumably be confirmed by every African man, woman, and child. On the other hand, Mutwa claimed to be relating secrets that were only revealed during the initiation of a witchdoctor. “If ever you pass what you are about to be told today on to the ears of the aliens,” his instructor had warned him during his own initiation, “a curse shall fall upon you” (1964: xiii). By publishing these stories, including a word-for-word account of all the secrets conveyed during his initiation, Credo Mutwa had clearly broken his sacred tribal oath of secrecy. As Mutwa put it, he had made a “terrible choice to betray my High Oath as a Chosen One” (1964: 455). Although this betrayal apparently violated the dual source of his authority – shared tradition, secret initiation – Credo Mutwa nevertheless asserted his role as traitor as if it underwrote the authenticity of his accounts of Zulu folk religion.

In the 1960s, calling himself a Zulu witchdoctor, Credo Mutwa traced his lineage back to his maternal grandfather, who served as the “High Witchdoctor” under the Zulu King Cetshwayo (ca. 1836–1884). During the 1990s, biographies of Credo Mutwa traced his lineage back to his great-grandfather, the High Sanusi of Zulu King Dingaan (ca. 1745–1840), and observed that in 1963 Credo Mutwa had been “officially declared” or “officially proclaimed” the High Sanusi of the Zulu people (Ringing Rocks Foundation 2001, Payback Press 2001). As Mutwa noted in 1964, the term, sanusi, which designated an “Unmarried High Witchdoctor,” was etymologically related to the Sanskrit sanyassin, an “Unmarried Holy Man” (Mutwa 1964: 439). Nevertheless, he eventually appropriated this title for an inherited role transmitted from his maternal grandfather. Although the “official” structures through which this title was bestowed upon Credo Mutwa have never been specified, in 1963 they could only have been official apartheid structures, such as the Department of Native Affairs, which was busy installing new chiefs and traditional leaders for the Bantustans. Unlike the public declaration of Shaka Day in 1954, however, there is no evidence of any public ceremony proclaiming Credo Mutwa as the High Sanusi of the Zulu people. Instead, capitalizing on his reputation as an author and building on the authority of his texts, Mutwa found a public role in South Africa as an African tourist attraction.

Culture and Nature

During the 1970s, Credo Mutwa was employed by the South African National Parks Board as the attendant of a traditional African tourist village located in the black township of Soweto outside of Johannesburg. Designed for the entertainment of foreign visitors, this display of authentic African religion, culture, and traditions was generally ignored by Africans. Above the entrance, Mutwa inscribed the warning: “ALL LIARS, ATHEISTS, SKEPTICS AND FOOLS MUST PLEASE KEEP OUT!” As journalist Joseph Lelyveld observed, anyone who passed through the entrance found “a shrine that seemed to derive its authenticity partly from the cult of the avenging Hindu goddess Kali and partly from Disney World” (Lelyveld 1986: 249). Struck by the eclectic and idiosyncratic symbolism on display, Lelyveld called into question the authenticity of this tourist attraction. Like his writings, Mutwa’s African village in Soweto evoked the strangeness of Africa. During the black-consciousness uprising of 1976, African students attacked Credo Mutwa’s shrine, burning its huts, carvings, and other artifacts, because they saw his tourist village as promoting the tribalism of apartheid and separate development. Although Mutwa eventually had to abandon his shrine and leave Soweto in 1978, the Credo Mutwa Village remained on the tourist itinerary into the 1990s with its burned and blackened features.

During the 1980s, Credo Mutwa established a larger and more ambitious tourist attraction within the South African Bantustan of Bophutatswana, an African nation...
that was not recognized by any other nation in the world, except by the apartheid regime in South Africa. At Lotlamoreng Dam Cultural Park, beginning in 1983, Mutwa supervised the construction of small adobe villages, each representing the traditional culture of one of South Africa’s tribal African peoples. Traditional villages were built for Tswana, Zulu, Ndebele, Xhosa, and Southern Sotho groups. Around these displays, Mutwa erected clay statues of African deities, most prominently a twenty-foot-tall African goddess. Praising Lucas Mangope, the president of Bophuthatswana, Credo Mutwa declared that “Anyone who gives me the opportunity to rebuild the African past knows what he is doing” (Republic of Bophuthatswana 1987: 19). Following the first democratic elections of 1994 and the reincorporation of Bophuthatswana into South Africa, the cultural park was deemed to belong to the National Parks Board. Credo Mutwa was expelled. By August 1995, as anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff found, the cultural village had become an informal settlement in which people lived in and around the various tribal displays.

Moving to the Eastern Cape, Credo Mutwa was employed by the Shamwari Game Reserve, near Port Elizabeth, where he sold African artifacts, such as sacred necklaces, headdresses, icons, and implements used in rituals. “In the Zulu tradition,” according to the publicity for the reserve, “each of these artifacts must be kept alive by being used in a sacred way on a regular basis.” Accordingly, Credo Mutwa was charged with the responsibility of performing the rituals that would keep these objects alive for the tourist market. In addition to authenticating African artifacts, Mutwa presided over a traditional African Arts and Culture Village, Khaya Lendaba, the “Place of Enlightening Talk,” which was next to the Shamwari Born Free Conservation and Education Center. Once the cultural village was built, however, Credo Mutwa was forced to leave. By 2000, the cultural center was run by the Rev. Mz wandile Maqina, featuring a one-hour show of song, dance, and stories depicting rituals of love, marriage, birth, and circumcision and the daily lives of traditional rural village. Although this traditional village came to be operated by a Christian minister, who had been identified by South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission as responsible for working with the apartheid regime in fomenting violence against Africans in the Eastern Cape during the 1980s, the merger of indigenous African culture and nature continued to attract foreign tourists.

Although he left under uncertain circumstances, the merger of culture and nature at Shamwari defined a new role for Credo Mutwa as an indigenous environmentalist. In August 1997, Mutwa received the Audi Terra Nova Award for his contribution to wildlife conservation at the Shamwari Game Reserve. The patron of the award, the conservationist Ian Player, identified Credo Mutwa as the “sole surviving Sanusi, the highest grade of spiritual healer” (Audi 1997). As this indigenous authority was appropriated by conservationists, Mutwa lent his support to various environmental causes. During 1997, Credo Mutwa spoke at the sixth international Whale and Dolphin conference, sponsored by the International Cetacean Education Research Centre, in Queensland, Australia, relating African traditions about the special relationship between Africans and whales and dolphins. During 1999, he spoke at the Living Lakes Conference, sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service at the Mono Lake Visitor’s Center, Lee Vining, California, recounting indigenous African traditions about sacred lakes. Proponents of animal rights found in Credo Mutwa an indigenous African defender of animals. “Apartheid is dead,” he observed, “but ‘separatism’ is alive and well,” an apartheid-like separation between human beings and animals (Mutwa 1997). For environmentalists, conservationists, and animal-rights activists, therefore, Credo Mutwa lent an aura of authenticity that could be appropriated in the service of a variety of popular causes.

During the 1990s, the new medium of the internet changed the terrain for promoting cultural tourism. While an announcement was made in 2001 that Credo Mutwa, the “visionary behind the venture,” planned to construct a new cultural village, Kwavezitemba, featuring a Zulu hut, a Pedi-Tswana hut, a Dokodo healing hut, and a Digoja-Star hut, he had already established a prominent place in cyberspace. For example, Mutwa’s account of Zulu traditions was featured on the Kwa-Natal Tourism site; his explanation of the meaning of indigenous symbolism featured on a site, “Living Symbols of Africa,” that exported a range of African artifacts; and his artwork decorated TheAfrican.Com, the “website of the African diaspora,” which claimed two patrons, the ancient Egyptian hawk-deity Heru and the Yoruba deity Shango, who was depicted on the website in a painting by “His Holiness Credo Mutwa, Zulu Sanussi [sic] of South Africa.” In these sites on the internet, Mutwa’s indigenous authenticity was employed to invite tourists to South Africa and to sell tourist artifacts from South Africa. As indicated by the website of TheAfrican.Com, Credo’s Mutwa’s indigenous authenticity had become global on the internet as he provided religious legitimation for an indigenous culture supposedly shared by Africans all over the world. Although he had presided over a series of failed cultural villages in South Africa, Credo Mutwa now played an important role in a new global cultural village on the internet.

Native Knowledge
At the heart of his claim to authenticity, Credo Mutwa insisted that he possessed specialized indigenous knowledge that could be used in healing, divination, education, and social transformation. Following the democratic
elections of 1994, the new government in South Africa supported a number of initiatives that involved recovering “indigenous knowledge systems” as the basis for an African Renaissance. Throughout Africa, largely in response to the AIDS pandemic, new interest was shown in the indigenous knowledge and human resources of traditional healers. At a meeting of traditional healers and representatives of the World Health Organization held in 1997 in Kampala, Uganda, Credo Mutwa defended the importance of indigenous knowledge about healing in Africa. Recognition of indigenous healers by the WHO, Mutwa proposed, “will show the scientists that our people are not just a bunch of superstitious savages. If the world accepts many of our herbal medicines, this will help to ensure the survival of our traditional healers” (Cohen 1997). At the thirteenth International AIDS Conference meeting in Durban, South Africa, in 2000, Credo Mutwa appeared wearing a sacred healing necklace. As a member of the executive committee of the Nyangazizwe Traditional Healers Organization of South Africa, Mutwa promoted the use of an indigenous herb, *Sutherlandia* (Kankerbos, in Afrikaans), as a cure for AIDS. Instead of relying upon expensive foreign pharmaceuticals, medical practitioners could find an effective treatment in South Africa. “It’s there in the violated plains of my fatherland,” Credo Mutwa declared. “It is being ploughed up as a weed” (Cape Times 15 March 2001). Like this indigenous herb, traditional healers were generally being ignored by the scientific medical profession in South Africa.

Alternative medicine, including spiritual healing, is a central preoccupation of New Age spirituality. Under the editorship of Bradford P. Keeney, who has been described as a psychologist, medicine man, and shaman, a book on the healing wisdom of Credo Mutwa was published in the United States in the series, “Profiles in Healing.” Keeney apparently recommended Mutwa to the attention of the directors of the Ringing Rocks Foundation, which was established in Philadelphia in 1995 with the mission “to explore, document, and preserve indigenous cultures and their healing practices” (Ringing Rocks Foundation 2001). As its first project, the foundation decided to sponsor Credo Mutwa with a lifetime stipend that would “allow this treasure to live out his days free to create as he chooses” (Ringing Rocks Foundation 2001). Recognizing him as the High Sanusi of the Zulu, the foundation bestowed another title upon Credo Mutwa, Ringing Rocks Foundation’s “Distinguished Artist and Teacher of African Traditional Culture.” On the foundation’s website, Mutwa would be given space to transmit his indigenous knowledge to others. The directors of the foundation seemed to imagine their website as the culmination of Mutwa’s long career of establishing cultural villages in South Africa since they intended to compile a retrospective profile of those sites on the website. “We hope to spend time with him at each of the sites he has built,” they stated, “recording through pictures and his own words the background for his cultural and healing villages” (Ringing Rocks Foundation 2001). Although he had no secure place in South Africa, the Ringing Rocks Foundation in the United States promised to provide Credo Mutwa with a healing center in cyberspace.

In keeping with the eclecticism of New Age spirituality, the African healing practiced by Credo Mutwa was equated with the healing systems of other indigenous cultures. Increasingly, he operated at the intersection of African and Native American traditions. In 1997, for example, Credo Mutwa, the “well-known Zulu prophet,” and Roy Little Sun, a Native American healer who had been born in Indonesia as Roy Steevenz, but was reportedly adopted by the Hopi, performed a ceremony entitled, “Healing the African Wound.” At the Wonderboom, the “Tree of Life,” in Pretoria, these indigenous healers took two feathers, one from an American golden eagle representing the sky, the other from an African guinea fowl representing the Earth, and tied them together to signify the healing of Africa through the sacred union of Earth and sky, indigenous Africa and Native America. Unfortunately, since they included the feather of an endangered species, the healing feathers were confiscated by U.S. custom officials at the Atlanta airport when Roy Little Sun returned to America. Although his campaign to recover the feathers, including appeals to President Bill Clinton, failed to secure their return, Roy Little Sun returned to South Africa for another ceremony in 2000 to reaffirm the healing connection between the indigenous people of America and Africa.

The indigenous authenticity represented by this fusion of African and Native American spirituality was also attractive to some white South Africans. During 2001, for example, a New Age event in the Eastern Cape of South Africa was advertised as “A Tribal Gathering,” not a gathering of indigenous African tribes, but a festival attracting primarily white South African enthusiasts for Native American spirituality. Living in a Tipi Circle, participants at this gathering would celebrate Mother Earth, enter a sweatlodge, and perform the ceremonies of the Medicine Wheel. Promising that African ritual specialists, *sangomás*, from the local village would also visit the gathering, the advertising for the event certified the merger of African and Native American spirituality by featuring a photograph of Credo Mutwa at the Medicine Wheel. In the United States, New Age enthusiasts tended to assume the basic equivalence of all indigenous spirituality. For example, the Heart Healing Center in Denver, Colorado, hosted a conference in 2001 of “Indigenous Earth Healers.” At this gathering of indigenous healers from all over the world, Africa was represented by the High Sanusi of the Zulu, Credo Mutwa. Unable to attend in person, Mutwa was replaced on the program by his student, C.J. Hood, a “white Zulu” from Port Elizabeth in
creatures who cause violence, or the Some are evil, bringing harm to human beings, such as the have long known about many species of extraterrestrials. According to Mutwa, Africans that supposedly featured prominently in African myths, traditions. In these terms, indigenous authenticity was law of apartheid, by maintaining indigenous African democracy, but apparently not the divine and natural which included communism and parliamentary tech-feature discrediting the prophet that seemed to run at the beginning of every year. Nevertheless, Mutwa lent his credibility to divination workshops, often designed for business executives, to teach indigenous African tech-niques for contacting and communicating with ancestors, divining through mediumship or sacred objects, and making long-term regional and global predications.

**Alien Encounters**

In his writings of the early 1960s, Credo Mutwa referred to “aliens” and “the Strange Ones” who came from outside of Africa. Beginning with the ancient Phoenicians, the “Strange Ones” arrived in unfamiliar ships from unknown lands across the sea. European colonizers, also referred to as the “Strange Ones,” had established alien empires in Africa. In the post-colonial era, as Mutwa advised, Africans had to resist the “schemes of the Strange Ones,” which included communism and parliamentary democracy, but apparently not the divine and natural law of apartheid, by maintaining indigenous African traditions. In these terms, indigenous authenticity was established in opposition to the aliens and Strange Ones who came from outside of Africa.

During the 1990s, however, Credo Mutwa used the term aliens for beings from outer space, those extraterrestrials that supposedly featured prominently in African myths, legends, and traditions. According to Mutwa, Africans have long known about many species of extraterrestrials. Some are evil, bringing harm to human beings, such as the *Muhondoruka*, fifteen-foot high, cylindrical, column-like creatures who cause violence, or the *Mutende-ya-ngenge* (also known as *Sekotoswana* or *Puhwana*), green creatures, with large heads, chalk-white faces, and large green eyes, who capture people, cut them up, and put them back together again. The most dangerous aliens, however, were the *Mantindane*, who are “star monkeys” and “tormenters,” the powerful extraterrestrial reptiles known as the Chitauri, and the Greys, the small servants of the Chitauri. The Chitauri’s evil schemes to harm humanity included supporting institutionalized religions. “They like religious fanatics,” he observed. “Ones who are burdened with too much religion are very popular with the Chitauri” (Martin 1999). Working through institutionalized religions, the evil Chitauri seek to divide and conquer human beings.

By contrast to these dangerous aliens, other extraterres-trials are good. The *Mvonjina* are three-foot high creatures, looking like a “caricature of a white person,” who act as “a messenger of the gods” by bringing knowledge to humanity. Other races of beneficent extraterrestrials frequently appearing in Africa included the friendly *Sikasa*, the timid *Mmkungateka*, the beloved *Nafu*, and the ape-like *Mhembhi*. Besides trying to communicate with human beings, these aliens from outer space have often mated with African women. “There have been many women throughout Africa in various centuries who have attested to the fact that they have been fertilized by strange creatures from somewhere” (Mutwa 1996: 152). Although apartheid had criminalized interracial relations in South Africa, aliens from outer space were apparently engaging in interspecies sexual relations throughout Africa.

By his own account, Credo Mutwa has experienced many encounters with extraterrestrial beings. As early as 1951, in what is now Botswana, he witnessed a falling star, a strange vehicle in the sky, and two alien creatures disappearing into the spaceship. In the bush where the spaceship had landed, these aliens had left behind extraterrestrial rubbish. Along with the local people who witnessed this event, Mutwa made sure that the rubbish was buried. “That is the African tradition,” he explained (1996: 135). He also encountered a variety of aliens from outer space in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Zambia during his travels in the 1950s. Besides seeing extraterrestrials, he also claimed to have eaten them, describing the smell and taste of their cooked flesh. According to Credo Mutwa, the ritual consumption of extraterrestrial flesh was common in Africa, sometimes causing severe illness, but sometimes resulting in mind-altering experiences of great beauty, harmony, and transcendence.

Visiting what is now Zimbabwe in 1959, however, Credo Mutwa underwent his most dramatic encounter with extraterrestrials. While digging for medicinal herbs, he was suddenly confronted by five “little fellows,” strange, unfamiliar beings, small dull-gray creatures, with large heads, but thin arms and legs, who captured him and took him to a metallic room, shaped like a tunnel, where they probed and tested his body. The aliens then forced him to have sex with a female of their species, an experience that Mutwa reported as cold, clinical, and humiliating. “I felt like a victim at a sacrifice,” he recalled (1996: 142). After this ordeal, he was deposited back on Earth, with his clothing torn, only to discover that he had been missing for three days.
Based on these encounters, Credo Mutwa emerged as an authority on extraterrestrial beings. In a book on alien abductions, Professor John Mack of Harvard University devoted a chapter to Credo Mutwa’s meetings with beings from outer space. Although he recounted his humiliating treatment by his extraterrestrial tormenters, Mutwa stressed the positive potential of human exchanges with aliens. “I just get furious,” he declared, “because the people from the stars are trying to give us knowledge, but we are too stupid” (Mutwa in Mack 1999: 57, see also 198–218).

As confirmation of his global recognition as an authority on aliens from other worlds, Credo Mutwa was invited to deliver the keynote address at an international “Conference on Extraterrestrial Intelligence” in Australia during March 2001.

In establishing Credo Mutwa as an African authority on extraterrestrials, the New Age conspiracy theorist, David Icke, played a significant role. A former sports broadcaster in Great Britain, Icke developed a distinctive blend of personal spirituality and political paranoia that he promoted through books, public lectures, and an elaborate website. Although he seemed to embrace every conspiracy theory, David Icke identified the central, secret conspiracy ruling the world as the work of shape-shifting reptilians from outer space. As Icke revealed in his book, *The Biggest Secret*, these extraterrestrial reptiles interbred with human beings, establishing a lineage that could be traced through the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the Merovingian dynasty of medieval Europe, the British royal family, and every president of the United States. Although they plotted behind the scenes in the secret society of the Illuminati, the aliens of these hybrid blood-lines were in prominent positions of royal, political, and economic power all over the world. Occasionally shifting into their lizard-like form, these aliens maintained a human appearance by regularly drinking human blood, which they acquired by performing rituals of human sacrifice. In *The Biggest Secret*, David Icke invoked the indigenous African authority of Credo Mutwa to confirm this conspiracy theory about blood-drinking, shape-shifting reptiles from outer space. Reportedly, Mutwa declared, “To know the Illuminati, Mr. David, you must study the reptile” (Icke 2001; see also Icke 1999). In two videos produced and distributed by David Icke, “The Reptilian Agenda: Volumes 1 and 2,” Credo Mutwa confirmed that extraterrestrials, the Chitauri, were a shape-shifting reptilian race that has controlled humanity for thousands of years. Icke and Mutwa appeared together on a popular American television program, “Sightings,” to explain the alien reptile conspiracy. In his lectures in the United States, Icke insisted that Credo Mutwa provided proof for his conspiracy theory, as one observer noted, in the “pure voice of a primitive belief system.” In Credo Mutwa, therefore, David Icke found indigenous authentication for an alien conspiracy, and of course, this is also about nature, understood as the order of the universe.

**Folk Religion, Fake Religion**

In retracing his long journey from Zulu witchdoctor to New Age shaman, I have highlighted Credo Mutwa’s ongoing reinvention of himself in relation to different appropriations of his authority. As we have seen, during the 1950s Mutwa was used to authenticate African artifacts for a curio shop in Johannesburg. Through his writings in the 1960s, his tourist attraction in Soweto in the 1970s, and his cultural village in Bophutatswana in the 1980s, he was used to authenticate the racial, cultural, and religious separations of apartheid. During the 1990s, as he acquired the label, shaman, through the interventions of Bradford Keeney, Stephen Larsen, David Icke, and other exponents of New Age spirituality, Credo Mutwa’s authority was invoked to authenticate a diverse array of enterprises in saving the world from human exploitation, environmental degradation, epidemic illness, endemic ignorance, organized crime, or extraterrestrial conspiracy. In all of these projects, the indigenous authenticity of Credo Mutwa added value, credibility, and force because he represented the “pure voice,” untainted by modernity, of an unmediated access to primordial truth.

These appropriations of Credo Mutwa raise important problems for any assessment of authenticity in the study of folk religion. In conclusion, I would like to highlight only two issues that require further reflection as we wrestle with the ordeal of authenticity. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that Credo Mutwa is a fake, a fraud, and a charlatan, as the South African media would have it, rather than the authentic voice of indigenous African religion as he appears in cyberspace. Even if he is a fake, we are still faced with the problem of analyzing what Credo Mutwa has really been doing in the field of indigenous African folk religion. Even a fake, as I will suggest in conclusion, can be doing something authentic.

First, even if fake, a fake religion can draw upon recurring, enduring motifs of indigenous folk religion. Folk religion is often assumed to be timeless, deriving its authenticity from the faithful repetition of discourses and practices that have persisted from time immemorial. Like any form of religious life, however, folk religion has reformers, reformulators, and innovators. Credo Mutwa, it might be argued, is precisely such an innovator in African folk religion. Like the eighteenth-century English poet William Blake, who adapted recurring pagan and Christian mythic motifs to create his own innovative, creative, and idiosyncratic religious mythology, Credo Mutwa has drawn upon recurring patterns and processes of indigenous African religious life to produce an innovative mythology that ranges from the original earth goddess to the ultimate encounters of human beings with aliens from outer space. Certainly, neither the goddess nor the extraterrestrials in this mythology simply preserve African folk religion. Instead, against the background of an indigenous religious landscape, these mythological inventions create
new possibilities for African religion in the contemporary world. During the 1990s, widespread enthusiasm for these inventions has been evident on the internet. In cyberspace, any line that might divide folk religion from fake religion has been blurred. As a religious figure representing both indigenous authenticity and innovative applications, Credo Mutwa is perfectly suited, even if he is a fake, for playing a significant role in the emerging productions of different forms of folk religion, including nature-related ones.

Second, even if fake, a fake religion can do real religious work by establishing the kinds of relations among superhuman beings, subhuman beings, and human beings that are worked out in any folk religion. In the case of Credo Mutwa, these classifications have been central to his ongoing creative work in redefining African indigenous religion. As a religious innovator, he has constantly called attention to the importance of these basic classifications not by reifying them but by emphasizing the creative exchanges among them. Although the basic distinction among superhuman deities, subhuman animals, and human beings might seem stable, Mutwa has always worked to put those fundamental classifications at risk. Speaking at the Whale and Dolphin Conference in Australia in 1997, for example, he urged his listeners to rethink these classifications.

Some time during the long journey of human history, there comes a time when human beings must stop thinking like animals, must stop thinking like perishable beings, must stop thinking out of greed, fear and ignorance. The time has come for all of us to think like Gods, to act like Gods, to speak like Gods, but to remain humanly humble (Mutwa in Haecker 1998).

Although he exhorted human beings to be like superhuman gods, Credo Mutwa also insisted that representatives of Western civilization, who had consistently treated Africans as if they were a subhuman species, as he noted during the 1960s in *Indaba, My Children*, had falsely arrogated to themselves a supremely superhuman status. “The entire Western civilization is based upon a blatant lie,” as Mutwa told Harvard researcher John Mack, “the lie that we human beings are the cocks of the walk in the world, the lie that we human beings are the highest evolved forms in this world, and that we are alone and that beyond us there is nothing” (Mack 1999: 215–16). Mutwa’s reports about extraterrestrials, therefore, might be regarded as reinforcing this challenge to the “superhuman” status of Western human beings. Consistent with any measure of authenticity within folk religion, therefore, Credo Mutwa was doing real religious work by mediating among superhuman, subhuman, and human beings in the world.

These classifications, like any religious classifications, represent religious mediations that can be situated in history. As I have tried to suggest, Credo Mutwa’s innovations in African folk religion can be located in a history that stretches over fifty years from the enforced separations of apartheid to the fluid connections of the internet. Briefly reviewing that history, I have only been able to raise the problems involved in adjudicating the authenticity of this self-proclaimed representative of African indigenous religion. If we assume that he is the real thing, we might conclude that Credo Mutwa is an exemplar of indigenous African folk religion in South Africa that has been misappropriated in the global fake religion on the internet. However, recalling that he has been generally dismissed within South Africa as a fake, a fraud, and charlatan, we must recognize that Credo Mutwa has achieved a greater aura of authenticity in cyberspace than in Africa. At every stage in his personal history, Credo Mutwa has found that his indigenous authenticity had to be certified by aliens, from apartheid ideologues to environmentalists to New Age conspiracy theorists, who have appropriated his aura of indigenous authenticity for their own projects. Throughout the long career of Credo Mutwa, the line between folk religion and fake religion has been consistently blurred through this ongoing interchange between indigenous inventions and alien appropriations of authenticity. In the end, these exchanges suggest that Credo Mutwa has been most authentic when he has been used, claimed, or even abducted by aliens.

David Chidester

Further Reading


See also: Animism (various); Castaneda, Carlos; Harner, Michael – and the Foundation for Shamanic Studies; New Age; Shamanism (various); Somé, Malidome Patrice; UFOs and Extraterrestrials.