

"Recovering Religious Ecology with Indigenous Traditions"

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Introduction: Indigenous Perspectives and East Asian Classics

The argument put forward in this paper is that minority, or indigenous, peoples bring a unique voice to cross-cultural perspectives on East Asian religious traditions.¹ These insights arise from indigenous interactions with sacred sites as well as the ways in which indigenous peoples incorporate strong sensory perspectives through singing, dancing, and ritual practice. Moreover, these diverse peoples warrant consideration in any examination of the classical world's religions. Considerations of religious ecology, place, and practice in indigenous traditions deepen a humanistic, text-based investigation. Such an exploration in the East Asian context recognizes the contributions of both indigenous Han groups as well as other small-scale societies to the enduring civilizational and cultural values of literate East Asian civilizations. Such pervasive ideas as *ch'i*, *Tao*, shamanic healing, the organic character of the cosmos, as well as the "continuity of being" suggest indigenous concepts that also passed into the literate classics. Awareness of diverse ethnic experiences and influences on classical texts themselves would deepen our understanding of those writings.

¹ The term, indigenous, refers to that which is native, original, and resident to a place. While often thought of as remote minorities, indigenous peoples are a significant global population of over 500 million peoples in Africa, South and East Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Australia, the Pacific region, Northern Eurasia, and the Americas. Having been used in international settings the term, indigenous, has been claimed by these diverse local, tribal, and traditional peoples as they struggle for their right to exist. This struggle has been given extraordinary recognition in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* adopted in 2007. The ambiguity of the term, indigenous, carries insight into the single most demanding challenge faced by all of these peoples, namely, their sustainability as distinct peoples in relation to their homelands. Indigenous, thus, refers to small-scale societies around the planet who share and preserve ways of knowing the world embedded in particular languages, story-cycles, kinship systems, worldview dispositions, and integrated relationships with the land on which they live.

Attention to ethnic diversity could focus on a study of mountains, rivers, groves and waterfalls described in classical texts as places that commanded ritual practices, and evoked spiritual and poetic reflections. Cultural values are often formed in relation to particular geographical places. Yet, when these values are articulated by the great sages and teachers, and transmitted in the literate traditions, they are often treated as purely conceptual notions transmitted from mind to mind. Understanding the roots and branches of human thought in the literate tree of any major civilization is a daunting task. Understanding how indigenous peoples see themselves as entirely woven into their animate lifeway of person and place illustrates what indigenous peoples could bring to a study of classics. That is, according to many indigenous thought traditions actual physical places may be understood as alive and capable of deeply affecting the human psyche. Thus, place is also a modality of person that may leave lasting and significant impressions on thought traditions.

It is well known that regard for place is not an isolated feature of indigenous systems of thought. Rather, place is often associated with practice as well as the more comprehensive context which we call here, lifeway. Indigenous spokespeople have described their traditional ecological knowledge as interwoven into the whole fabric, or lifeway, of their existence as a people. The lifeways of contemporary indigenous societies and the ecosystems in which they reside are vital, interactive wholes. The close connections between territory and society, religion and politics, cultural and economic life are the means whereby indigenous peoples have maintained, and are recovering, their knowledge systems. Indigenous lifeways as ways of knowing the world are both descriptive of enduring modes of sustainable livelihood, and prescriptive of ecological imaginaries, or deep communal, psychic attractors between place and people that activate sustaining relationships with the community of life. It is this close relationship and conceptual reflection found in

mythic stories and ritual symbol systems that we can call a "religious ecology."² Thus, a study of classics, such as those of East Asia, can be expanded and deepened by understanding the creative relationships with place in historical human societies and their contemporary manifestations among indigenous peoples.

One such analysis of indigenous relationships with place, practices, and religious ecology in East Asia that reaches into an indigenous past is the suggestion by Frederick Mote and others that the ideal of the gentleman-scholar, or *junzi/chun tzu*, is derived from older shamanistic relationships with bioregions, concerns for community welfare and health, and the "magic" in human bonds.³ This imaginative line of investigation might be deepened by a comparative exploration of questions regarding place and the relational character of self, society, and nature embedded in both classics and indigenous narratives. One classic text that lends itself to these types of questions is the *Songs of the South*. So, also, the place-based, personal, sensory and seasonal character of Chinese poetry suggests that many of the poetic texts would be productive in comparative discussions related to East Asian indigenous thought.

Such an expanded study might also focus on traditional educational practices among indigenous peoples in which forms of self-cultivation are encouraged for the larger good of the community. For example, the Bunun peoples of Taiwan have transmitted striking modes of singing based on their ancient exchanges with the birds of the island. We know from studies of other Proto-Malaysian peoples that this attention to birds is a central dimension of an ancient worldview shared among these diverse peoples from the Malay Peninsula, through the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagoes, and on to Taiwan. This ecological knowledge was not an isolated way of knowing but embedded in a religious ecology. By religious ecology, then, a conceptual position is suggested that indigenous peoples, as well as those

² See John Grim, "Introduction" in *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Inter-being of Cosmology and Community*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press for the Center for the Study of World Religions, 2001: xxiv - xli.

³ See Frederick W. Mote, *The Intellectual Foundations of China* New York: Knopf, 1971: 30; also Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius - The Secular as Sacred* New York: Harper, 1972: 1-17.

axial age communities that gave rise to the "world's religions," interacted with biodiversity and local bioregions with subsistence practices in which regard for the sacred was integrated into daily life. In indigenous settings, then, the sense of "community" is not exclusively human oriented, but extends out into the community of life. Religious ecology is presented here as a particular conceptual understanding transmitted by indigenous peoples and often found in classical texts that is typically embedded in the lifeways of these different peoples.

There is no doubt that such investigations of local indigenous peoples will also uncover insights into the problematic character of human values, namely, the potential for manipulation of societal desires, needs, insights, and motivations by those seeking power over others. An argument can be made that the civilizational impulse itself may arise from a need to transcend local oppression of kin-family networks so that a fuller creativity might be expressed. Even this argument, however, begs the question of some attention to, if not a more careful investigation of, local and indigenous peoples in relation to East Asian religions.

The inclusion of indigenous peoples in a study of classics might also give additional clarity to our understanding of "human rights." In this view, rights language does not immediately spring from jurisprudential concerns as much as being an outgrowth of sapiential views of animals, plants, and bioregions as vested with personhood and having "rights." That such rights can obligate individuals and communities to ritual actions, for example, carries forward an impulse to stand in harmonious relation with a significant Other. This type of wisdom experience, then, has cosmological orientations. To trace this type of incipient cosmological thinking into the literate texts of East Asia would be a meaningful study. Thus, investigation of the formative roles of indigenous peoples in East Asia acknowledges that any examination of core classical texts actually involves a broader range of human communication skills and wisdom practices than simply those of literate construction.

Underlying this last emphasis on cosmology is a holistic and organic turn in East Asia that seems to have especially rich roots among indigenous peoples. The term “lifeway” expresses this point in that lifeway is a viable term for understanding religion among indigenous peoples. That is, religion should not be understood from a contemporary secular perspective as a separate act from subsistence practices, trade, or social interactions. Rather, concerns for the Source-of-Giving in diverse indigenous societies are interwoven into the full range of life. Thus, religious activities in indigenous settings hold insight into that complex of relationships treated as cosmology. In many indigenous settings this identification of the range of life, or ecology, stands in significant comparative relationships to cosmology. Thus, one can conceptually distinguish both religious ecologies and religious cosmologies among the world's religions, including indigenous traditions. But religious ecology especially is more central when discussing ecosystems, and religious cosmology is germane to the investigation of the heavens while acknowledging that they are often linked in ritual, myth, and personal experience.

Finally, there is an additional comparative area of significance that underlies so much of what is said above, and that is an examination of ethical orientations coming from the organic world. As these are transmitted in the classics they often continue to frame contemporary social values. Consider how significant a phrase such as “harmonious society” means at present in China. Is this simply a Chinese Confucian concept or are their ancient ideas of community behavior and values embedded in this profound insight? Just as we can reexamine core texts as “Ecological Classics,” so also an examination of East Asian indigenous peoples situates those classics in an intellectual family of resemblances. The challenges of our contemporary environmental crises remind us of the importance of sustainable ideas, practices, and traditional environmental knowledge transmitted among local and indigenous peoples. While there is no need to romanticize these indigenous relationships with the animate in place, there is also no need to ignore them.

Sacred Sites: Particular Embodiments of Place, Practice and Religious Ecology

In speaking about "sacred sites" I want to shift our attention somewhat from the regional focus on religion and ecology in East Asia to a consideration of sacred sites among indigenous peoples in the regions in which I do field studies, namely, the Native Peoples of North America, and their lifeways. My intention is to briefly describe place in indigenous lifeways as sites of conservation and sustainability not by reason of scientific conservation, but because of the significance of religious ecologies and the practices they evoke. Moreover, these experiences are themselves not isolated phenomenon but embodied experiences that call for an interpretation of religious ecology as embodied practice.

Broadly speaking, sacred sites are familiar from the reverence, affection, and historical importance given to such sites as the Temples of Heaven and Earth in Beijing, the Wailing Wall and Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and Muslim pilgrimage sites in Mecca. Similarly, religious monuments such as the Buddhist remains at Borobudur in Indonesia, the Hindu-Buddhist sites at Angkor Wat in Cambodia, or the sacred mountains in China all stir our imagination as prominent and well-known sacred sites. These brief remarks, however, explore a subset of "sacred sites," namely, "sacred natural sites" many of which have been maintained and protected by indigenous peoples through centuries of outsider control, industrial extraction, and nation building.

Sacred natural sites can be differentiated as areas of land, water, or biodiversity concentration that have special spiritual significance to peoples and communities. Again, I do not want to deny or erase, the importance of sacred natural sites for the more literate world's religions. To some extent, however, I do want to suggest that many of the world's religions emphasize the significance of human shaping in the space of their religious sites. Often, in these intercultural traditions, religious architecture in the form of temples, synagogues, mosques and churches become refined sacred settings. Among indigenous and local communities the emphasis in sacred sites more markedly interweaves human communities and the natural world. Broadly speaking, in indigenous communities when the sacred

manifests in space-time the primary focus of attention is not on the human but on cosmological forces experienced in the land.

Even as I nuance "sacred natural sites" in this cosmological dimension, I am reminded of an anonymous Penobscot Indian writer who observed that among these Native Peoples of the coastal woodlands now in the state of Maine in the United States and the province of Nova Scotia, in Canada. This Penobscot intellectual observed that: " 'Land' means Penobscot reverence for the land. And land means fiddleheads, deer, corn, muskrat, beaver, ermine, fox, bear, bobcat, eel, salmon, the pond, the ledges, the mountains. Sara's springs, birch, ash, sweet grass, poison ivy, Fort Dawson, Sandy Beach, lower village, upper villages. Oak Hill, the swamp, the burial grounds, laughter on a warm summer night, tears at an Indian wedding, coos of a little baby, dogs, cars, oil trucks, Indian drums, old people hiding all the secrets of wisdom, young people finding wisdom through acrid smoke and finding that is not the essence of all things, and that when you come to the land you can't burn it, you can't smoke it, you can't ignore it. Land is forever, and we can't sell it, we can use it, for the benefit of ourselves and our children, and our grandchildren, and even those generations that are not born." ⁴

This brings me to a continuing point about sacred natural sites among indigenous peoples, namely, any such site manifests religious ecology. That is, it is not the land simply in and of itself that demands attention. Rather, a sacred site is significant by virtue of the interactions of the community of life within that place. Practices in relation to that place, whether ritual practices or subsistence practices, are attentive to that dimension of lifeway, we are calling here, religious ecology. The primary focus is not on the human exclusively, but in maintaining a set of religious relationships that attends to the world as the reciprocal flow of giving and taking. This crucial lesson for 21st century environmentalists reminds us that moving from one environmental issue to another with mind-bending insights from science and in fierce legal and policy-oriented fights cannot alone bring about the transformations

⁴ Maine Indian Newsletter 5(1) January 1972, p. 6 cited in Peter Nabokov, *Where the Lightning Strikes: The Lives of American Indian Sacred Places* New York: Viking, 2006:19.

we need. Rather, we need to find our own mainstream religious ecology that attends to a broad range of environmental demands from diminishing our carbon footprints to nurturing biodiversity even as human populations surge. This kind of cultural sensitivity to place and practices related to those sites, what we are calling religious ecology, has endured among many indigenous peoples. But it has come at a high price of both internal fragmentation and external pressures of accommodation, extraction, and destruction. I would like to consider a few indigenous sites to explore what some indigenous peoples have had to endure to maintain their lifeway even as their sacred natural sites transform themselves before their eyes.

Consider a Hopi sacred boundary marker of their land at a butte south of Holbrook, Arizona in North America. The Hopi, as many of us know, are Puebloan peoples in the Southwest, who still reside in the oldest continuously inhabited site in North America, namely, Oraibi. Many Hopi also live on three massive sandstone ridges that stretch out like fingers from a high geological formation called Black Mesa. Theirs is a complex spiritual path based on maintaining proper relations with rain through ancestral places such as *Tsimontukwi*, or as Whites call it, Woodruff Butte. The place was also known by other indigenous medicine practitioners, such as the Dene/Navajo peoples, as *Tooji' Hwi' idzoh*, or "Line Extends to the River," and by Zuni people as *Dematsali Im'a*, namely, a place for gathering Jimson weed used in divination. These different indigenous place-names all refer to Woodruff Butte that once rose 500 feet from the surrounding plain. In the late 1980s it was bought by a gravel-mining operation and, despite requests from these native peoples, the granite rock core was blasted, crushed and mixed with boiled used tires for highway pavement. Hopi priests alerted to the imminent destruction of pictographs at the site arrived in time to see bulldozers demolish the place before their eyes.⁵

This brings me to a second point regarding sacred natural sites, namely, the protection of such sites requires recognition of rights and responsibilities that are

⁵ See the film *In Light of Reverence* at <http://www.sacredland.org/in-the-light-of-reverence/> (accessed May 23, 2012).

not found in legal and economic systems based on private property, individual rights, commodity markets, and totalizing national sovereignty over local commitments. Such a new understanding of practice in relation to place requires a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of life that transcends an ethics of expediency and use. Such an ecological ethics has begun to take shape in recent developments among conservation agencies and indigenous communities outlined, for example, in documents published by the World Commission on Protected Areas of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.⁶

Founded in 1948 the World Conservation Union, or as it is more commonly called the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), has gradually come to realize that "protected areas" must include human cultures and that conservation should do no harm to human societies. Thus, biodiversity conservation has become attuned to "Community Conservation Areas" in which indigenous ideas about governance, equity, participation and benefit sharing have been implemented in successfully sustaining both indigenous cultures and wildlife. To be frank, indigenous communities have diverse motivations for protecting areas and resources, and the native terms and concepts may identify agendas quite different than the objectives of IUCN in describing protected areas. These agendas might be expressed as community needs, wellbeing, the good life, an ethical worldview, and sustainable use of natural materials rather than outright protection of land, biodiversity, or wildlife in itself. Moreover, in many instances and for long periods of time, the protection of homelands made indigenous peoples natural conservators. As ancient managers of such sites, indigenous leaders and communities accepted certain rights and responsibilities that can broadly be identified with governance, equity, participation and benefit-sharing throughout the community.

⁶ See, for example, the Commission website at <http://www.iucn.org/about/union/commissions/wcpa/>; as well as the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species at <http://www.iucnredlist.org/> (last accessed May 23, 2012)

This second point emphasizes the often painful historical encounters whereby indigenous communities "lost" these rights and often abdicated their responsibilities through despair at the enclosure of their shared indigenous commons whether forest, jungle, or plains. Many indigenous peoples have experienced a deep alienation from their cultural heritage and relationships with local biodiversity brought on by the progressive, productive, and profitable ethos of the global market. In the name of national security or development, governments have seized lands, biodiversity, and resources. In this sense it was not that long ago when well-meaning conservation agencies themselves bought land and moved indigenous peoples off that land to create new parks oriented towards protecting biodiversity and encouraging tourist income for the dominant nation-state.⁷ Yet, IUCN has gradually come to recognize that indigenous peoples in Community Conservation Areas can be effective conservators and protectors of both land and biodiversity when lifeways and traditional religious ecological practices are encouraged and allowed to function. Thus, the IUCN actively promotes an understanding that where cultural diversity is acknowledged and supported, biodiversity flourishes.⁸

This brings me to a third and final point in this section, namely, the feel for sacred natural places. Relationships engendered by diverse indigenous traditions have both a historical character and lived experiential dimensions. The phrase, "historical character," is trying to describe cultural identity that comes from living with a place in dreams and in deep time. "Deep" here does not suggest something simply unknown and mysterious. Rather, "deep" is used to suggest that process whereby a people become conscious of themselves and their past in relationship to place and biodiversity in that place. Thus, the conscious stories of community identity and meaning generated by human dwelling and practice in place stand in

⁷ For example, see Mark Dowie, *Conservation Refugees: The Hundred Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Marc Chapin, "A Challenge to Conservationists," in *World Watch Magazine* November/December 2004, Vol 17, No. 6.

⁸ See especially http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/social_policy/sp_themes_ip/ and http://www.iucn.org/congress_08/forum/journeys/biocultural/ (both websites last accessed May 23, 2012).

relation to more unconscious, or deep, coalescing, and layering experiences of that place. This relates to the use above of the phrase ecological imaginaries to suggest deep psychic attractors resident in place for indigenous wisdom keepers. Of late, for Native Peoples in the Americas and elsewhere, their story often centers on resistance as they struggle against absorption into neo-colonial, global economic, and mainstream national systems of governance. Such struggles are not totally new since most indigenous peoples recall their ancestors' mythic efforts to survive the challenge of origin moments, or inappropriate relations with place on the part of their ancestors, or attacks by monsters that resided in those places. Native Peoples often speak of the land as manifesting the physical remains of those fights with monsters whose bodies became mountains, whose blood-flows formed river courses.

The Struggle for Indigenous Voice in a World of Global Capital

Now, however, the struggle of indigenous peoples in relation to their sacred lands has been transformed into the dominant settings of law courts, jurisprudential inquiry, scientific analysis, and policy legislation. In these contested settings new identities in relation to sacred natural sites is emerging for Native Peoples from Australia to Taiwan, from Mapuche waterways in Chile to the Black Hills Lakota in North America. Interestingly, mainstream America has largely understood this resistance by means of an environmental trope of "first ecologists" that is also mapped on older images of indigenous peoples as timeless, changeless, and, thus, ahistorical. But even a cursory consideration of a sacred natural site, such as Bear Butte in South Dakota, provides examples of the changing character of the Lakota peoples in relationships with this mythic-historic place that activates a religious ecology.

The Lakota writer, Charlotte Black Elk, describes her peoples' relationships with Bear Butte as not only formed by their ancient religious ecology but also by their current relationships shaped by resistance to the practices and conceptions of dominant society. Charlotte Black Elk said that:

"Our name for Bear Butte is *Paha Wakan*, sacred mountain. Bear Butte was not only a religious place, it was also a meeting place...Our full name for Bear Butte is *Sinte Ocunku Paha Wakan*, the sacred mountain at the edge of the trail. And so it sits at the edge of the Black Hills [in current western South Dakota in North America]. When you look at the religious view that lands have - that all lands are sacred, but some areas are more sacred - you look at Bear Butte as a place for reflection. A place where no war party would attack someone who was there to pray. It was respected by all the Tribes. Other people came down - people who were our enemies came down to pray. We did not attack them. I think looking at that, the fact that it remained a central part of the Lakota community, of people going back there continually, it shows that there has been a continuum in our religion - the ideas of everything being a part of the whole and at a place like Bear Butte, you would be at the center of the earth at the center of the Hoop [of creation]."⁹

In their self-reflections as a mythic people, the Lakota recall their cosmogonic story that relates how they originally came out of a cave on Bear Butte. The people remember that they left their buffalo ancestors behind in that place as they took human form. Having surfaced they started a long journey coming back as they say to "the sacred mountain at the edge of the trail," namely, Bear Butte. They remember leaving to become human, and they recall coming back into relationship with the bison people who provided the Lakota with the means for subsistence. Today, Lakota identity involves dealing with the efforts of the National Park Service to preserve Bear Butte as a contemporary religious site with public access restricted by a fee for entry. Lakota historical identity and religious ecology is in a precarious relationship with state-sponsored tourism with religious ecology at Bear Butte.

This requires a balance between spiritual harmony and physical harmony, namely, the spiritual meaning of Bear Butte for the Lakota cannot be isolated from the physical mountain which now has a walkway to the top on one side for tourists and a "no trespassing" zone on the other side for indigenous participants who fast and perform ceremonies such as fasting or sweatlodge purifications in preparation for a Sun Dance ritual. Charlotte Black Elk concludes her reflections on this troubling accommodation saying:

⁹ "A Song from Sacred Mountain: Lakota-Dakota and Cheyenne Interviews" in *Readings in American Indian Law: Recalling the Rhythm of Survival* ed. by Jo Carrillo, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998: 105.

"What makes us Lakota? It's obviously not just Sun Dancing or fasting at Bear Butte or having powwows. It's something more than that. It's a whole philosophy. It's a state of mind that says, 'I'm only a small part of this. And unless I live well, nothing else can live well and if something else doesn't live well, then I can't live well.' And there's always this balancing and fine-tuning that has to go on. And you see a lot of activity going on as the crush for resources continues - whether it's sports resources like increasing revenue at Bear Butte or taking resources out of the land. 'What are you putting back? Why are you having it? Do you need it?' Someday, people will come to the realization that the earth lives. And if you abuse it to the point that you kill it, then nothing else will live. We're part of it. A small part. But a part of it. Philosophically Lakota."¹⁰

These historical challenges and realizations build character in ways that do not easily correlate place, practice, and religious ecology. Rather than an easy transition from one to the other, these remarks of Charlotte Black Elk remind us that contemporary indigenous relationships with sacred natural sites do not conform to non-indigenous romantic or environmental ideas about the immersion of indigenous peoples into local place.

Just as the Lakota people speak of Bear Butte as alive, so also sacred natural sites and the indigenous people who protect them undertake practices that activate lived experiential relationships with spiritual presences in the land. This is not an easy topic to discuss and many indigenous people prefer that non-native peoples refrain from discussing it. Yet, native teachers have said that "the landscape might be lonely without human beings," and others have taught that certain rocks reach out to them. These insights about the affection of plants, animals, and mineral spirits for indigenous individuals and communities establishes a significant insight for understanding the intimacy of indigenous lives lived in mutual affection for sacred places.

It is clear also that indigenous elders give examples of awesome and fear-inspiring experiences of land. Some sites are dangerous locations where sorcerers acquired fearsome powers for self-aggrandizement. Often these examples are read as prohibitions that resulted in traditional protection for sites. These taboos kept

¹⁰ "A Song from Sacred Mountain: Lakota-Dakota and Cheyenne Interviews:" in *Readings in American Indian Law: Recalling the Rhythm of Survival*:106-7.

individuals away so that biodiversity could flourish at such a site. While that may be the case, a striking comparison emerges when this cultural sense of an earth yearning for the human is contrasted with the objectivizing ethos of global capital that rejects nature as alive and sees economic use as the ultimate form of human-Earth relationship. If dominant, industrial societies are able to move beyond this objectifying, death-dealing ethos, the life of our sacred natural sites might call us to remember this era in which we made a turn toward a sustainable future. Ever mindful of our past, when we emerged out of this period of destructive technologies and practices, we might journey towards a new flourishing of the Earth community. The ancient East Asian classical texts certainly have roles to play in these transitions. As we learn in the engagement with indigenous peoples, we may find this recovery and reconstruction of our ecological relationships involves the human in every aspect of our interdependence.