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Sacred Landscape for a Global Approach

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ABSTRACT

The sacred values of the landscape and their meaning depend on the cultural contexts of reference that over time have consolidated or modified traditions, rituals and beliefs.

The sacredness of the landscape has no connection with materiality except with the sensory perception that helps man to feel and know what can not be touched.

The sacred landscape establishes the relationship between man and nature, through an aesthetic in which it is not always possible to find a rational dimension. A relationship that persists in the territory with the ability to acquire a greater degree of sustainability than other properties. The fear on the part of UNESCO and of the religious and secular communities of a weakening of this heritage requires facing the concept of "sacred value", starting from a reframing of the sacred landscape, the "Property of Religious Interest (PRI)", expression of a very rich cultural and natural biodiversity. Are the sacred landscapes at risk? Where and why? Is it possible rewriting the landscape or not? What is the behavior of local communities and different target users?

The contribution aims to analyze the concept of "sacred value" of the landscape with the support also of some significant examples taken from different cultural and geographical areas, very important case studies for a qualitative methodology with a global approach.

Keywords: Landscape; Sacredness; Values; Religious; Global Approach

I valori sacri del paesaggio e il loro significato dipendono molto dai contesti culturali di riferimento che nel tempo hanno consolidato o modificato tradizioni, riti e credenze. La sacralità del paesaggio non ha alcun legame con la materialità se non con la percezione sensoriale che aiuta l'uomo a sentire e conoscere ciò che non è tangibile. Il paesaggio sacro stabilisce il rapporto tra uomo e natura attraverso un'estetica in cui non è sempre possibile trovare una dimensione razionale. Una relazione che persiste

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nel territorio con la capacità di acquisire un grado maggiore di sostenibilità rispetto ad altre proprietà. Il timore da parte dell'UNESCO e delle comunità religiose e laiche di un indebolimento di questo patrimonio rendere necessario affrontare il concetto di "valore sacro" partendo da un confronto con il paesaggio sacro e quindi dalle "Proprietà di interesse religioso (PRI)", espressione di una biodiversità culturale e naturale molto ricca. I paesaggi sacri sono quindi a rischio? Dove e perché? E' possibile pensare di riscrivere il paesaggio oppure no? Qual'è il comportamento delle comunità locali e dei diversi utenti?

Il contributo ha come finalità l'analisi del concetto di "valore sacro" del paesaggio con il supporto anche di alcuni esempi significativi tratti da diverse aree culturali e geografiche, casi di studio molto importanti per una metodologia qualitativa con un approccio globale.

Keywords: Paesaggio; Sacralità; Valori; Religioso; Approccio globale

Introduction

Many communities perceive the sacred values of the landscape with a strong sense of awe and gratitude. These values, namely beauty, tranquillity, harmony, abundance, and uniqueness are intangible and can only be perceived with our senses. Infact, the landscape, with special reference to the religious one, perfectly embodies the supersedence of the dichotomy tangible/intangible that has always been present in the geographic context.

Since immemorial times, many communities have learned how to respect the power of natural elements, also establishing sacred and spiritual relationships with nature and diversity which are conveyed through the landscape. Even today, in many countries and especially in the Far East, Oceania and Latin America, native communities regard nature as a spiritual experience permeated with feelings of reverence, peace, humility, gratitude, harmony, unity and, most of all, a sense of belonging and identity.

In industrialised countries these ancient values and deep relationship with nature have been eroded, also due to a dramatic structural crisis experienced by the society. However, it is interesting to observe how in many parts of the world a wide number of communities still worship cults linked to nature. Of course, one of the most significant tradition in this sense is the protection of woods and forests where gods or ancestral spirits have their residence, as it happens in India or in Japan. These green areas have been designated as “sacred landscapes”. Although several researchers have described these landscapes in different ways, most scholars emphasise the unspoilt – or nearly so state of sacred woods and how they are preserved by local populations through specific taboos and rites exemplifying the spiritual and ecological *ethos* of the communities themselves (Motonaka, 2001).

With specific reference to these issues and biological and cultural diversities, the UNESCO initiated in 2003 an important “International Workshop on the Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation” (February 17-20, 2003) in Kunming (Yunnan province, Southern China). The workshop was aimed at creating an informal network of scholars for the acknowledgment of sacred landscapes as natural areas to be protected, and at the same time, identifying guidelines and drafting documents suitable to illustrate operative methods and criteria to support conservation projects in these territories. A key element of this international meeting was the work on a guidance document carried out jointly with IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), resulting in a volume which was published in 2008 (Wild R., McLeod C., 2008).

In China, in the Biosphere Reserve of the Xīshuāngbǎnnà Dai autonomous prefecture, also known as Sipsongpanna, the government has supported initiatives aimed at the dissemination of information, exchanges and in-depth studies on the crucial role of sacred natural sites when it comes to preserve biodiversity. These studies have also allowed to set up a series of projects to protect and preserve areas which are not properly enhanced with reference to this natural aspect.

By contrast with Eastern culture, the Western approach to biodiversity is beginning only in recent times to admit the importance of the relationship between local environmental knowledge and communities, although there are some very interesting examples of conservation, especially in rural areas. However, there is no doubt that, by comparison with the Far East, Western countries do not properly value the conservation potential of sacred natural places, which consists of an ancient and

widespread system of community-based protected and religiously sanctioned areas, promoting the preservation of biodiversity.

Within this cultural background, this paper is meant to raise awareness on the importance of sacred landscape, with a main focus on its natural features and thus on Far West (Latin America) and the Far East areas, where these traditions play a significant role in daily life (Niglio, 2015).

1. Sacred values of a landscape

The sacredness of a landscape is often regarded and perceived as a synonymous with silence, with the achievement of a state of interior peace which allows to sense a direct connection existing between man and nature, as well as between communities and their history (Turri, 2003). It is often individual contemplation or meditation that enables to reach this condition. In other cases, this perception can be part of centuries-old traditions and local rituals.

Sacred values or significance of a landscape can also be described in religious terms and serve as a catalyst for different forms of local identity. They can be experienced when an individual is under the influence of a spiritual environment or specific sensations which are universal rather than subjective and originate from situations and phenomena that instill in the observer intimate feelings of humility, intensity, admiration and serenity (Mallarach, J. M., 2012, p.21).

Some environments enable to reach such interior condition. In this sense, the reference to places such as the valley of the temples of the Aztecs, in the Oaxaca department, in Southern Mexico (**Figure 1**), or the long route with Inca settlements between Colombia and Argentina (**Figure 2**) is not a coincidence.



Figure 1: Mexico. Oaxaca. The sacred landscape of Mount Alban
Source: author, 2013



Figure 2: The Inca route across the Andes, between Southern Colombia and Northern Argentina

Source: author, 2017

These examples suggest how the sacred significance of a landscape may be described and presented using different forms and expressions although some aspects cannot be properly conveyed without a personal and direct experience, since in some cases the verbal language cannot be used, and it is replaced by non-verbal communication. Geographers who traveled across unexplored lands starting from the 18th century were aware of this, and their notebooks are filled with impressions and experiences as well as descriptions.

For many people, the sacred value extends beyond the human cultural value and as such it tends towards the dimension of the infinite and absolute, which is still well known among native populations settled across the Andean range, in Latin America. The religious experience of nature is at the intersection of spirit and culture and thus culturally mediated. However, some natural spiritual values or meanings, including those pertaining to biological diversity, can be regarded as universal and part of the religious heritage, belief and spiritual traditions (Atran, Axelrod, 2008).

In an age paying special attention to the scientific approach, nature and material values, the risk to appreciate the landscape exclusively as a resource to be exploited or a subject to be studied - rather than a place to experience is absolutely real. Spiritual and emotional dimensions inherent to landscape observation need to be newly integrated in order to motivate and inspire people to take action to preserve and protect their cultural heritage. As José Maria Mallarech (2012, p.9) points out:

“Spiritual and religious dimensions play a significant role in most man-nature relationships. Linking spiritual rituals and natural experience helps develop new and deeper relationships with nature, also prompting a sense of profound respect and reverence of the natural world, and more in general, of the whole universe”.

Many cultural contexts recognise the existence of a spiritual dimension of the landscape. It is mostly in Asia and the Far East that sacred and spiritual values are to be found everywhere in the landscape. Although they are difficult to identify, local people know how to discern both strength and intensity of such values.

Mountains, trees, water sources, islands... a good number of these places are linked to ancient traditions and religious rituals which are sometimes no longer practiced, whilst other values are currently being rediscovered and brought to a new life. Japanese culture teaches us to reflect on these values and acknowledge the sacred dimension of nature. An example is provided by the route climbing the sacred mountain of Yasumandake on the Hirado island, in Japan (**Figure 3**), the theme of which is linked to the culture of hidden Christianity (Niglio, 2017; Inoue and Niglio, 2018).



Figure 3: Japan. Shinto shrine and *Torii* gate on the summit of Mt. Yasumandake, Hirado Island, Japan

Source: author, 2015

However, sacred places can also be found in monuments, cities, sites hosting the historical heritage of a community, museums, archives, libraries. All places pervaded by values of faith, gratitude and authoritative respectfulness can be regarded as ‘treasure chests’. In this context, it is also important to underline how these values have a strong historical significance, and as such are not static and final but, on the

contrary, changeable over space and time as created by humans and strictly connected to their cultural and environmental dimension.

The sacred value of the landscape has been the object of several and interesting studies and publications by the *International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)*. Ever since its establishment, occurred in 1948, IUCN has focused its activity on mainly natural areas, as they are the object of its mission, but has also supported the preservation of sacred sites both natural and human-made as precious elements exemplifying different cultures and part of the human heritage (Wild, McLeod, 2008).

The 16th General Assembly of ICOMOS, held in Quebec, Canada, in 2008 as well as the Youth Forum and Aboriginal Forum, saw the adoption of the Declaration on the *Preservation of the Spirit of the Place*, as defined by its tangible (buildings, sites, landscapes, roads, etc.) and intangible (memories, rituals, sacredness, values, colours, etc.) aspects, that is to say the physical and spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion, and mystery to a place (Quebec Declaration, 2008).

As a matter of fact, the Declaration has highlighted how the sacredness of a place is a constantly evolving process, responding to culture- and time-specific needs for change giving rise to different sacred values and sharing methods. However, the conservation of the intangible aspects of a landscape implies the knowledge of its history.

The history of the sacred landscape is a fundamental element of the complex relationship between man and nature. With reference to sacred places, both natural and artificial, the rapport is always reverential (Jackson, Henrie, 1983). Such reverence is frequent due to its own nature. As an alternative, it can be applied to significant events, historical associations, arrangements for the ritual communion with the divinity or for the mediation with the universe as Ramakrishnan, scholar of theology and member of the *Indian National Science Academy* remarks:

“...whether nomadic hunter-gathers or settled farmers, these varied ecocultural groups, surviving under relatively harsh environmental conditions, have always looked at nature with awe and reverence”.
(Ramakrishnan *et al.*, 1998)

Many societies have actually preserved, at least to a certain extent, a connection with nature, which is often mediated through natural sacred sites. We cannot rule out, however, the possible, considerable significance of these places even to cultures and religions that are now devoid of a direct relationship with nature (Rössler, 2003). For example, the origins of the concept of “sanctuary” and the widespread tradition of throwing coins into city fountains in secular Western communities can be ascribed to rituals which were once performed in ancient sacred natural sites. A very interesting case of this sacred relationship between secular societies of the West and native population rituals is the connection linking the astronomical observatory of the Muisca population (pre-Columbian settlement, **Figure 4**) with the Dominican sanctuary “Ecce Homo” (**Figure 5**) situated in the Boyaca department (Villa de Leyva, Colombia). With the arrival of the first Dominicans (17th century) in the northern part of Latin America, the Boyaca region, situated along the border with Venezuela, hosted the first important settlements linked to indigeneous sacred areas, where populations were subsequently converted to Christianity.

In this case, however, the Dominicans were able to establish a dialogue with local populations, enhancing and respecting the sacredness of their landscapes. Even the

the so called “capillas doctrineras”, built to spread the new religion, were strictly related to the local traditions and provide another example of a sacred place to be considered within a both natural and artificial landscape, where two different cultures intertwined.

Landscape sacredness is thus related to the significance that man attributes to the place. In case the site has also a human value, i.e. built by the community, sacredness will be strictly connected to the ability to integrate in the construction the elements typical of the surrounding natural landscape, without degrading it.



Figure 4: Colombia. Villa de Leyva. Astronomical observatory of Muisca population (6th century b.C.)

Source: author, 2009



Figure 5: Colombia. Villa de Leyva. *Ecce Homo* Church and Dominican Convent (17th century) next to the Muisca astronomical observatory

Source: author, 2009

It is clear how a sacred landscape establishes a deep relationship between man and nature, thus between human and ecological aspects, by means of an aesthetic where a rational dimension and a common explanation with reference to an architecture cannot always be traced. This is something that the monks of zen Buddhist temples situated in the Kansai region, in Japan, in charge of taking care, on a daily basis, of both landscape and temples, know very well. In this context, it is very interesting to highlight the sacredness of the extensive cypress forests (**Figures 6 and 7**) that are periodically planted to guarantee not only the temporal reconstruction of some of the main temples (for example in the Ise Jingu sacred area), respecting the correct maturation of the wood, but also to provide proper material to the reparation and restoration construction sites which may be necessary to deal with unpredictable circumstances frequently caused by natural events like earthquakes, floods and typhoons (Niglio, 2016).

Buddhist monks are aware of the fact that landscape sacredness is an intangible value recognised by human beings and that its conservation must occur through a sharing approach and the intergenerational and trans-cultural transmission, which, with special reference to temple areas, plays a crucial role also in the involvement of the external community within the enhancement process of the sacred landscape.



Figures 6 and 7: Japan, Kyoto. Mount Hiei, a sacred cypress forest useful to provide wood and bark to maintain temples as meditation places

Source: author, 2015

2. The sacred landscape of Christian origins in Japan

In 1844, a mission supported by the Paris based Foreign Missions Society, that was already operating in Vietnam and China, settled in the Okinawa islands waiting for better days to resume contacts with Japan. As a matter of fact, many European powers with expansionist ambitions in the Asian region which were already aware of the precarious political situation of the country started to navigate once again in the direction of the Far East (Niglio, 2016, *Avvicinamento alla storia...*). In 1854, Japan reopened its gates to Western countries and the first trade agreements were signed. Three important ports were also inaugurated: Hakodate in the Hokkaido island, in the Northern part of the country, Kanagawa, next to the city of Yokohama on the island of Honshu, and Nagasaki, on the Southern island of Kyushu. These ports were of great strategical and crucial importance with regard to the relationships with the main Japanese islands. Following this event, the Foreign Missions Society of Paris immediately invited two French missionaries, Father Furet and Father Petitjean, to set sail to Nagasaki passing by the Yokohama port. Moreover, on this occasion Pope Pius 9th canonised the missionaries who had been martirised in Nagasaki between 1597 and 1633 and also advocated the construction of new Catholic churches especially in the Nagasaki area but also on the Hokkaido island, in Northern Japan.

During the above mentioned vicissitudes, the territory which was mainly affected by the construction of Christian churches was the Nagasaki area. A document issued in 2015 by the Japanese government with the contribution of concerned municipalities and academic institutions to support the appointment of Christian churches as UNESCO sites has highlighted a rich cultural heritage of a type which is hard to imagine in a country like Japan, most known for its Buddhist and Shintoist temples rather than neo-gothic Christian churches.

However, this heritage concerns today several islands included in the prefectures of Nagasaki and Saga, that is in the areas where the first contacts with the missions arrived in Japan starting from the half of the 16th century mostly occurred. It is interesting to point out how a good number of the currently visitable churches was built in places which had already been previously influenced by the Christian culture, with a reprisal occurred starting from the second half of the 19th century after the end of the repressions perpetrated by the Shogun.

Even today, the use of some expressions like *Hidden Christians* and *Kakure Kirishitan* recalls the first religious conversions of the 16th century. The term *Kirishitan* derives from Portuguese (Cristão) and indicated Japanese converted to Christianity. After the ban imposed by the Shogunate, the Christian culture disguised itself as Buddhism, and many people became Sempuku Kirishitan or “hidden Christians”. Even today, although the ban is no longer effective, many Japanese continue to practice this rite mixed with Buddhism and Shintoism. These people are also known as *Kakure Kirishitan*. In 1859, with the advent of Protestantism and of the Anglican church, many of the churches of today began to follow this rite.

These historical references are fundamental to understand first and foremost the intangible value specifically attributed to a cultural landscape in South-Western Japan where traditions and rituals linked to the presence of the Christian culture are still practiced today. Of course, this is hardly apparent when not perceived through

traditions and tales of the locals. In order to better appreciate the sacred value of the Japanese landscape it is important to refer to the already cited analysis provided by scholar Makoto Motonaka in 2001 on this matter.

Motonaka claims that, as for methodological reflections, sacredness of a place cannot be separated by its strictly sensorial, religious and cultural value. In particular, he introduces the concept of “associative cultural landscapes” where immaterial elements are directly connected and associated to more tangible traditions. A sacred place is thus a true and tangible reality including highly regarded intangible universal values requiring to be properly preserved and enhanced.

It is exactly in this perspective that the recent report *Hidden Christian sites in the Nagasaki Region* drafted and coordinated in 2017 by Agency for Cultural Affairs seated in Tokyo and the respective prefectures of Nagasaki and Kumamoto meant to analyse the extremely rich heritage of the cultural landscape and Christian churches built along the Southern coasts of Japan starting from 1550, with a strong reprisal occurred since the end of 19th century.



Figure 8: Editing of repertoire images by Olimpia Niglio,
Source: The report *Hidden Christian sites in the Nagasaki Region* (2017)

The prefectures of Nagasaki and Kumamoto boast today a rich architectural heritage which is absolutey unique to Japan due to the presence of an eclectic style in perfect harmony with the more rigorous appearance of Buddhist and Shintoist temples and sanctuaries. However, the area, a 2017 candidate to the UNESCO list, is not only distinguished by material elements such as architectural or artistic works, but, most of all, by sacred landscapes featuring values going well beyond the limits of a spatial delimitation.

An interesting case in this sense is that of the sacred mountain and village of Kasuga on the previously mentioned Hirado island. This tiny island has been named as a sacred mountain as here, at the time of religious persecutions, the *Kakure Kirishitan*, or the hidden Christians, practiced their faith revering the mountain. The sacredness of this place was also further strengthened over time, also because here is where many of their ancestors were martirised. This is why it is said that this mountain is the place where the hidden Christians were able to preserve their faith for centuries, and as such must be protected for its sacred value.

The island of Nozaki is another interesting case. Here, the people worship the remains of an ancient village. The cultural value of the landscape is absolutely remarkable,

given not only the presence of a Christian church built at the beginning of the 20th century, but, most of all, the importance that the place acquired when the hidden Christians, forced to migrate, took cover in this tiny island of the Japanese sea so that they could be (almost) free to practice their religion.

The intangible value of the Japanese landscape is corroborated by the study carried out at the Sakitsu village, in Amakusa. Here the hidden Christians were able to profess their religion and to replace objects of daily use, both at home and at work, with Christian devotional ones. However, rather than the revered object in itself, the focus of the conservation project is the space incorporating this tradition, which is thus preserved and enhanced as an integral part of the cultural heritage and sacred landscape.



Figure 9: Remains of an ancient village on the island of Nozaki.

Source: Nagasaki Prefecture World Heritage Registration Division.

The above mentioned case study lay the foundations for an important reflection on different research methods and ways to deal with sacred cultural landscapes, where exteriority and materiality are replaced by sensory experiences, contemplation and the value of whatever might be perceived but not necessarily seen. In Japan, according to the Zen tradition the protection of a landscape aims for a direct communication with the surrounding natural environment, also taking into account that its exterior appearance is an obstacle to the clear perception of the Truth that it contains. Fundamentally, reality is only what we perceive with our mind. These experiences, however, enable us to realise that our finite nature and the power of conventions that we obey reduce considerably our capability to understand reality in its multiple aspects. Our individuality hinders comprehension skills in this sense. Thus, we should reflect on the importance of nurturing and comprehend our aesthetic sense beyond those cultural limits that impede us to appreciate what is different from ourselves. The direct knowledge of other cultures will enrich our interiority and, most of all, contribute to establish an intercultural dialogue where sharing and tolerance are instrumental to build a peaceful world.

Conclusions to (re) start a reflection

The illustrated examples and case study, as well as the observations presented in this paper show how landscape is nothing but an “interdisciplinary summary” (Turri, 2003, p.6), where the experiential (anthropological) approach, alongside a subjective (emotions, creativity, imagination) and objective (cultural heritage, traditions, scientific codings) knowledge, lead to an “emotional interpretation” of the landscape based on sensorial elements and respective values depending on the observer. Here is why landscape sacredness is strictly linked to man. Although it is true that over time the humanization of the landscape has prevailed, history teaches us that the human being, since most ancient times, has always established a dialogue with the environment and its resources also according to survival needs. It is exactly following this ecological vision that a harmonious dialectic between man and nature, as well as between cultural models and anthropisation processes, has emerged. Over time, however, this has led to the nearly total erosion of the human dimension of the landscape, and thus of its sacredness. We have thus experienced the steady degradation of the sensorial perception, the codification of messages conveyed by nature, the physiological approach of the landscape and all those organic aspects the latter has inherited, which have no longer found a proper positioning within an inherent - yet increasingly materialistic perception. This basic investigation provides a limited and relative knowledge of the landscape intrinsic values and its sacredness. It is thus necessary to start interdisciplinary reflections able to establish a new dialogue between man and nature – and its values. Actually, as Eugenio Turri points out [...] *the current distribution of human population across the world is undoubtedly one of the most glaring aspects of the unbalanced relationship between man and the Earth, and this has significant consequences on the way we approach landscape* (Turri, 2008, p. 34).

It is of paramount importance to re-establish a balanced dialogue between man and landscape. However, the process implies a real assessment of the multiple cultural elements that need to be once again put at the stake. The new dialogue between man and landscape with its intrinsic values is synonymous with studying, knowing, examining in depth the surrounding environment, giving a new value to those sensorial and perceptive skills of the human beings, as required by a cultural project of such stature. It is only by reviving human sensibility that we can perceive the sacred dimension of the landscape and the beauty it has always conveyed.

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