"Ceremony and ritual are not important for conservation, they *are* conservation:" An inquiry into remembering and reviving culture and ritual for the protection of land and sacred sites

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Abstract

This paper argues that land-honouring ceremonies and rituals are an intrinsic component of indigenous conservation efforts. It first summarizes the drivers of an overall global decline of communities' conservation and stewardship of local sacred natural sites. It then presents the stories of nine communities' efforts to reverse these trends by strengthening or reviving cosmologies, rituals and ceremonies necessary to the protection and conservation of sacred sites, ecosystems and species. Through a comparative qualitative content analysis, six practical strategies necessary to such revival and revitalization are discerned: (1) strong leadership and regular community meetings that create unity and allow for the dismantling of internalized oppression; (2) efforts to establish greater tenure security; (3) the revival or strengthening of indigenous leadership structures that value and uphold traditional beliefs, practices, protocols, and knowledge; (4) the revival of core aspects of indigenous culture, including seed-keeping, agricultural practices, traditional medicine, music, stories and song, among others; (5) the remembrance and enactment of ceremonies and rituals that function to protect, care for, and "feed" the lands and sacred natural sites; and (6) the creation of schools and programs that ensure intergenerational transfer of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and worldviews. The paper then explores three intangible processes that necessarily go hand-in-hand with such practical efforts, including: 1) cultivating intimacy with nature; 2) being open to collaboration with the more-than-human world; and 3) innovating to ensure that one's culture remains current and relevant in present times.

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I. Introduction

Today, sacred natural sites and the indigenous cosmologies that accompany them face a variety of threats, including historical and present colonization and its attendant oppression; lack of secure property rights; commercial resource extraction and the concomitant pollution or destruction of local ecosystems; large scale infrastructure projects; westernized education; capitalism, globalization and related changes to local and regional economies; climate change, population growth and resulting competition for increasingly scarce resources; privatization of lands previously held communally; weakened local leadership; growing prevalence of mainstream religions; aspiration for consumer lifestyles and attendant assimilation to dominant culture; and rural-to-urban migration. (Bhagwat and Rutte, 2006; Pretty et.al, 2009). More specifically, the combination of five specific trends may lead to the breakdown of previously held cosmologies, rules and protocols that ensured the respectful stewardship and conservation of sacred natural sites and local ecosystems:

1. Outsiders come in and forcefully impose external systems, causing a culture to lose sovereignty, right to self-govern, and control over what happens within the boundaries of its lands;
2. Beliefs are eroded by the imposition or slow conversion to mainstream and/or monotheistic religions;
3. Other ways of relating to the world (e.g. capitalism and consumerism) gain precedence *and* elders do not pass on traditional beliefs;
4. Human leadership and human governing institutions weaken, with leaders losing credibility or failing to enforce rules; and
5. There is scarcity and competition for resources and survival is at risk, *and* community members observe others breaking rules and suffering no supernatural or human-enforced consequences.

When all or some of these forces become endemic, even strongly held spiritual beliefs, well-established local knowledge, and the practices and rules that ensure biodiversity and ecological abundance are discarded or "forgotten." The overall local ecosystem may then degrade; because of their sanctity, the biodiversity of sacred natural sites are often the "last to go."

This research aims to address the question of if and how it might be possible to counteract that degradation by strengthening or reviving communities' indigenous cosmologies, belief systems, rules, norms, protocols, and practices related to the stewardship and conservation of sacred natural sites, ecosystems and species. The original hypothesis for this effort was:

> If efforts are made to support, strengthen and revive local cultures, beliefs, rules and practices concerning how to protect and conserve the natural world, communities will steward local lands and natural resources in a manner that results in higher biodiversity and ecological flourishing – for both sacred sites and the wider local ecosystem.

The original central questions investigated were thus:

- What is being done to strengthen, support or revive the cultural values, beliefs, rules and practices that function/previously functioned to promote biodiversity of sacred natural sites?
- What have been the outcomes of these efforts? What have been their strengths and successes? Their weaknesses and failures? What can be learned from these efforts?
- Is it possible to leverage the local/indigenous beliefs, rules and practices that foster biodiversity and conservation of sacred sites to extend to territories not currently identified as such? How is this being done, or how could this be done?

However, as the research progressed, a different driving question emerged: "How can communities who have lost or are losing the cosmologies, rituals, ceremonies and practices necessary to honour their sacred natural sites, ecosystems and species remember, revive and strengthen those beliefs and practices?" The

resulting study describes the stories of nine groups around the world who have endeavoured to do exactly this. By comparing and analysing their experiences, the study arrives at six practical strategies and three intangible "aspects" that successfully effectuate such change.

At root, this research is a complex investigation into individuals' and groups' courage to dismantle internalized oppression,[1] re-establish their intimate connectedness with the natural and supernatural world, and grapple with core issues of identity and sovereignty – while also, often, simultaneously fighting against multi-national mining corporations or state-led large-scale infrastructure projects that threaten the biodiversity and health of their territory. As such, this study is also a treatise on the reclamation of cultural dignity and empowerment, the return to honouring one's ancestors and elders, and the forging of new kinds of relationships with the land and more-than-human world (Abrams, 1996).[2]

For beneath the strategies, the actions, the advocacy and the diplomacy is the deeper story of how humans are inter-woven into a web of relationships with plants and animals, water, mountains and soil, ancestors, spirits, energies and forces. In the haste and commotion of a modern world with very different priorities, we fail to see and "feed" such relationships, which thus become attenuated, impoverishing us in ways we may not understand but feel unconsciously, often as a vague longing for something we cannot quite articulate. The loss of these very intimate relationships is at the root of the planet's ecological devastation – and their reclamation at the heart of how communities may become more resilient as we head into an unknown future characterized by a rapidly changing climate.

The taxonomy of both the practical, concrete strategies and the intangible psychological, emotional and spiritual processes described herein may be of significance to individuals, communities, organizations, institutions, and foundations working to promote biocultural diversity, indigenous land and natural resource rights, community-driven conservation and natural resource management, climate change resilience, and the governance of sacred natural sites.

[1] Internalized oppression, referred to herein more commonly as "internalized colonization" occurs when a person comes to internalize and believe prejudices and biases about the identity group(s) to which he or she belongs, in the process through which an oppressed group uses the methods of the oppressing group against itself. (Leibnow, 2016)

[2] Coined by David Abram in his 1997 book, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* the term "more-than-human world" describes earthly nature, or "the things and elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects, entities, powers, potencies," I use this phrase as a catch-all term that encompasses all plant, animal and fungi species; mountains, rocks, water, soil and land writ-large; and any and all spirits, deities, forces, energies and ancestors.

II. Literature Review

A. What are sacred natural sites?

In many cultures, people's livelihoods, ecological knowledge systems, governance systems and social relations are intricately interconnected with the land and local ecosystems. And, within those ecosystems, there are often sacred sites that local people perceive to be endowed with special spiritual energies or significance. These sacred sites are often considered to be places - or "portals" - where humans may receive information or message from the spirits, deities or ancestors residing there (Samakov and Berkes, 2017). For many local and indigenous communities, sacred sites are "imbued with spirits that reside in nature and are 'numinous' in that they possess agency as sources of wisdom and law." (Verschuuren, 2016: 5)

Because of the vast variation of landscapes, peoples, cultures and spiritual beliefs, sacred sites are conceptualized in many different ways. Some cultures believe that the entire landscape is sacred, including every element of the ecosystem: all plants, animals, and insects, all stones, mountains and sands; the soil, the waters, the rain, the clouds, and the heavens, all life forms, and all objects of supernatural creation as sacred, (Sarma and Barpujari, 2011: 4). Other cultures differentiate certain areas or aspects of the landscape as sacred, often linked to particular creation myths, mythical stories, special landscape features (such as springs, mountains, or rock formations) or particular species of animal or plants living there, who may be considered sacred as well (Dudley et al. 2009).

However, some overarching generalizations are possible. Sacred natural sites are landscape-based areas, features, or locations that have spiritual significance to peoples, tribes, communities, and members of religious groups. They may include bodies of water, springs and headwaters, rivers, islands, mountains (or whole mountain ranges), rock formations, caves, forests, or groups of trees. They may vary in size from very small to very large, and may or may not include shrines, alters, temples, churches and mosques and other kinds of buildings where people gather together or visit to pay respects to the sacredness intrinsic to the site. The site may be sacred because of its inherent natural qualities (e.g. as a source of water or medicinal plants, or as a habitat or breeding ground of important animal species); because it is the site of a people's origin story, history, and related myths; or because it is the home of ancestors, a deity or group of deities, or certain spirits (Samakov and Berkes, 2017; Wild and McLeod, 2008; Verschuuren, Wild, McNeely & Oviedo 2010).

Local communities often protect sacred sites' sanctity through protocols that ensure that they are cared for and related to honourably and with utmost respect. Access to sacred sites may be completely forbidden, or restricted to certain spiritual or religious leaders, shamans, or healers. In other situations, access may be open to any member of a group, so long as they follow the proper protocols and dress, act, and comport themselves in the required way (Wild & McLeod, 2008, Verschuuren et al., 2010, Verschuuren, 2016, Dudley et. al, 2009, Chemhuru and Masaka, 2010, Bhagwat and Rutte 2006, Rutte, 2011, Shen, et al., 2012, Xu et al., 2005).

A central element of stewarding and honouring sacred natural sites are the rituals and ceremonies undertaken to care for both the physical sacred site itself as well as the spirits, deities, ancestors, and other supernatural forces residing within or reigning over the area. Care for sacred sites is often aligned with caring for and honouring specific deities, spirits, or ancestors. The deeper purpose of most rituals and ceremonies undertaken at sacred sites is to "feed" the land and the spirits, deities, and ancestors of the land related to or resident around that particular site (Shen et al., 2012; Adom, 2016; Bird-David and Naveh, 2008).

In instances where access is not strictly prohibited, sacred natural sites may also be places where community bonds are re-made and strengthened through prayer, rituals and ceremonies that promote the community's overall wellbeing and prosperity (Oviedo et al. 2005). Sacred natural sites may be places where people go to pray for rain, fertility, flourishing crops and healthy domestic animals, protection against disease, and peace and stability in their families and communities, etc. In many sacred natural sites, communities conduct cyclical or seasonal rituals which create opportunities for the community to tell their origin stories, sing

ancestral songs, perform ancestral dances, and re-enact key cultural traditions. (Bhagwat 2009). Such efforts help not only to sustain the culture, but also ensure that it remains vibrant and is passed on through the generations, (Tolla and Traynor, 2015). Sacred sites may be the place of religious festivals, lifecycle rituals, and secret society meetings, or places where youth are educated and initiated, or where offerings are made. (Wild & McLeod, 2008, Verschuuren et al., 2010, Verschuuren, 2016, Dudley et. al, 2009, Chemhuru and Masaka, 2010, Bhagwat and Rutte 2006, Rutte, 2011, Shen, et al., 2012, Xu et al., 2005). These rituals and ceremonies may also strengthen community, land and ecosystem governance; they may offer occasion for custodians and elders to discuss and announce customary rules and protocols to guide community members' behaviour; reprimand or punish those who transgress taboos and disrespect the spirits, ancestors or humans; and otherwise maintain social integrity (Tolla and Traynor 2015; Oviedo et al. 2005).

Over the past three decades, conservation researchers have increasingly found that sacred sites are loci of significant biodiversity, and that indigenous and local communities' traditional knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and natural resource management practices play a key part in their ecological flourishing (Bhagwat and Rutte 2006; Salick et al. 2007; Wild and McLeod, 2008; Lebbie and Guries, 2008; Metcalfe et al. 2009; Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010; Verschuuren et al., 2010; Dudley et al., 2010; Ormsby 2011; Vipat and Bharucha, 2014; Samakov and Berkes, 2017; Singh *et al.,* 2107). Researchers have also found that indigenous-conserved lands are particularly biodiverse (Garnett, et al., 2018; Jones, et. al, 2018; Schuster et. al, 2019). Indeed, 80% of the world's high biodiversity areas are reported to overlap with sacred lands claimed and managed by Indigenous Peoples and local communities (Sobrevila, 2008; Toledo, 2013). Sacred forests, in particular, have consistently been found to have higher species diversity than surrounding areas, often more than government-protected conservation areas in similar regions (Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010: 322). Researchers have found that sacred sites contribute to endangered species protection; biodiversity conservation; air, soil, and water management; carbon sequestration; and temperature control (Singh et al., 2017, Dudley et al., 2009; Verschuuren, 2010, Anderson, 2005).

The overlap between sacred sites and biodiversity is likely due to two causal factors. First, natural sites may have been originally marked as sacred *precisely because of their ecological flourishing*, or because they provide important "ecosystem services" such as controlling erosion, maintaining freshwater water quality and quantity, or sheltering the abundant growth of medicinal plants. Originally, sacred natural sites may have been designated as such to protect the forests, wetlands, springs and animal breeding grounds within them, upon which soil fertility, aquifer replenishment, species protection, and the life of myriad plant and animal species depend, and which are necessary for both thriving local ecosystems and human survival (Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010; Vipat and Bharucha, 2014).

Second, once established, the biodiversity of sacred sites flourishes precisely *because* they are protected by rules and institutions that influence how local people access, use and tend to them. Research is increasingly finding that Indigenous Peoples' stewardship of their lands promotes biodiversity and that the flourishing of certain species and ecosystems is directly related to human intervention and care (Hurd, 2006, Anderson, 2005, Shebitz and Kimmerer, 2004). Colding and Folke's literature review found that resource and habitat taboos supported by supernatural enforcement mechanisms have functions similar to those of formal institutions for nature conservation (Colding and Folke, 2001). Other researchers have found that because sacred natural sites are often governed by strict prohibitions, their ecology closely resembles the ecology of government protected areas, and that spiritually-based land protection protocols may have even *more* force than the dispassionate management of government agencies, often staffed by officials with minimal personal connection to the land (Dudley et al. 2009; Bhagwat and Rutte 2006; Lebbie and Guries, 2008; Boadi, et al., 2017).[3]

[3] An emerging understanding is that local peoples are part and parcel of local biodiversity, and that the exclusion of local people is one of the reasons why protected areas are ineffective, despite the large sums of money and manpower invested in maintaining them (Brown 2003). According to Hurd, "This idea of protected areas without people is…based on the romantic idea of wilderness as a place without people, but indigenous people can help maintain biodiversity. Where they have been removed, the biodiversity has declined." (Hurd, 2006) Indeed, Anderson's research on Native American tribes' stewardship of the pre-colonial ecosystems of California illustrates how the flourishing of those ecosystems was directly related to human interventions like controlled burns and sustainable harvesting, and Kimmerer's research on sweet grass harvesting and use has found that sweet grass thrives best in relationship with humans. (Anderson, 2005, Shebitz and Kimmerer, 2004). Colding and Folke's extensive literature review found that resource and habitat taboos supported by supernatural enforcement mechanisms have

The biodiversity of sacred natural sites is particularly interesting because they are, generally, common resources equally "owned" by all members of a society or community (Rutte, 2011; Samokov and Berkes, 2017).[4] Many of the characteristics that Ostrom identified as necessary to the successful long-term governance of commons/common pool resources are also critical to the sustainable management of sacred sites[5] (Ostrom, 1990). Indeed, in a meta-analysis of articles concerning sacred natural sites, Rutte found that most design principles present in institutions governing common pool resources are also found in those institutions governing sacred sites (Rutte, 2011). However, what sets sacred natural sites apart from other kinds of commons is that sacred sites are commons to which both living people *and* governing deities, spirits, ancestors have overlapping rights and responsibilities. Indeed, Samakov and Berkes conclude, "Sacred sites belong not only to this world, but to the invisible world as well" (Samakov and Berkes, 2017: 441). The institutions that enforce the rules concerning sacred natural sites' use and access are generally also both human and non-human.[6]

B. What factors encourage community protection of sacred natural sites?

The cosmologies of indigenous and local cultures are complex and nuanced, and weave humans into webs of relationship with non-human entities, including plants, animals, mountains, water bodies, spirits, ancestors, and deities, among others. In most cultures, various concrete mechanisms define the contours of such relationships, dictating how humans interact with the more-than-human world. Berkes sets out a theoretical framework that such mechanisms can be roughly described under the rubric of "traditional ecological knowledge," which necessarily involves: 1) empirical knowledge of local animals, plants, soils and the overall landscape; 2) resource management practices and systems that combine environmental knowledge with a set of locally-appropriate tools and techniques; 3) appropriate social institutions, including sets of rules, norms and codes of conduct that are the basis for coordination, cooperation and rules-making; and 4) a worldview that shapes environmental perception and gives meaning to the environmental observations (Berkes, 2012: 17).

Applied specifically to sacred natural sites, an alternative conception of Berkes' framework might include the following mechanisms:

1. Animist beliefs that weave humans into a world in which all entities are sentient, conscious and have agency;
2. Complex systems understandings that lead to practices that ensure that the sentient world is related to with respect and humility, cared for, and well-stewarded;
3. Rules, taboos, protocols and norms that ensure that the human members of the commons adhere to such practices - and a social fabric that ensures that such rules are widely known and widely held; and
4. Two kinds of strong, respected governing institutions: human institutions, and non-human "institutions," which, being supernatural, are all-seeing, all-knowing, and have enforcement powers far beyond those of humans.

These factors, which interrelate in a virtuous, reinforcing cycle, are very briefly explored below.

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functions similar to those of formal institutions for nature conservation. (Colding and Folke, 2001)

[4] Sacred forests, lakes, wetlands, and mountains are very rarely privately owned by individuals or families; even in rare instances where the land is owned by a religious institution, such ownership is generally deemed to be on behalf of the larger public, who has the right to access the site within the bounds of certain protocols and permissions, or accompanied by particular spiritual leaders. This idea is not covered extensively in the literature on sacred sites. Writing in 2017, Samokov and Berkes describe how "sacred sites in the study area are conserved by local communities and run as commons, a point not discussed in the extensive literature on sacred sites, except by Rutte (2011)." (Samokov and Berkes, 2017: 441)

[5] Ostrom's identified characteristics include: 1) Clearly defined boundaries of the communal resource and the user group; 2) Congruence between the common pool resource and its governance structure and rules; 3) Decisions about the common pool resource are made through collective-choice arrangements that allow most resource appropriators to participate; 4) Rules are enforced through effective monitoring by individuals or groups who are part of or accountable to the complete body of users/owners; 5) Violations are punished with graduated sanctions; 6) Conflicts and issues are addressed with low-cost and easy-to-access conflict resolution mechanisms; 7) Higher-level authorities recognize the right of the resource appropriators to self-govern; and 8) In the case of larger common-pool resources, rules are organized and enforced through multiple layers of nested enterprises (Ostrom, 1990).

[6] This is further described below, in Section B.4.

1. Animist beliefs that honour and respect the natural and supernatural world

Generally, animist[7] understandings and beliefs are what make sacred natural sites sacred. As described by Little Bear, animism is a belief system founded on the notion that the nonhuman world is alive, sentient, and profoundly relational. Little Bear explains how: "In aboriginal philosophy, existence consists of energy. All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and in constant motion. In this realm of energy and spirit, the relationships between all entities are of paramount importance" (Little Bear, 2000: 77). In animist cosmologies, every living and non-living entity has a consciousness that must be related to respectfully. Little Bear explains this conceptualization of the living landscape in the following way: "If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations" (Little Bear, 2000: 77). Humans are but one entity in a web of animate, sentient entities.

Very broadly speaking, animist ideologies understand the universe to have both visible and invisible or tangible and intangible forms – all of which are interconnected (Lacy & Shackelton 2017). Within animist cosmological frameworks, the lives of humans are intricately interwoven with the non-human spiritual world, and these connections must be carefully stewarded and nurtured (Obiora, 2015). Humans are less "stewards of the natural world, but instead *part* of that world, no greater than any other part….[this is a] practical recognition of the fact that all living things are literally connected to one another. As a result of these connections with the nonhuman world, native peoples do not think of nature as 'wilderness,' but as home. Natives do not leave their 'house' to ''go into nature,'' but instead feel that when they leave their shelter and encounter nonhumans and natural physical features that they are just moving into other parts of their home." (Pierotti and Wildcat, 2000: 1334). Deloria explains, how, "In the traditional (way of knowing), there is no such thing as isolation from the rest of creation'' (Deloria 1990:17).

Harvey defines animists as "people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is lived in relationship with… persons [who] are beings, rather than objects, which are animated and social towards others" (Harvey, 2005: xvii). Snodgrass and Tiedje find that "the animist recognition and appreciation of other-than-human persons represents a truly deep form of nature reverence… [that] bestows equal or even greater-than-human qualities on other-than-human persons" (Snodgrass and Tiedje, 2008: 22), while Naveh and Bird-David define animism as the belief in "a world full of immediate rational beings…[that] can be directly and personally engaged with" (Naveh and Bird-David, 2008: 56). For Berkes, this cosmology means living consciously within a "community-of-beings," which he defines as "a community shared by human persons and non-human persons" (Berkes, 1999). Sarma and Barpujari explain how within an animist cosmology, "The perception of nature is contiguous with that of society. Together they constitute an integrated order, alternatively represented as a grand society or a cosmic nature. Humankind is, thus, seen as a particular form of life participating in a wider community of living beings regulated by a single and totalizing set of rules of conduct…The human, nature, and the supernatural are all bound in mutual relationship," (Sarma and Barpujari, 2011).

Whether globalized or localized to specific sacred sites, animism often manifests in spirituality-driven conservation outcomes – even when there is no pre-conceptualized conservation intention (Boadi et al., 2007; Bird-David and Naveh, 2008; Jones et al., 2009; Pierotti and Wildcat, 2000).

[7] The concept of "Animism" was, for decades, beset with tinges of historical racism, as it was originally used by early anthropologists and evolutionary theorists to describe the irrationality of "less advanced" cultures. However, animism is currently re-emerging as a legitimate analytical framework by which to describe a wide range of belief systems (Harvey, 2013). However, Hogan makes the point that "animism is a word that scholars use to describe the worldview [of indigenous peoples]…However, it is not a term traditional indigenous peoples would use to describe our relationship with, and love for, the world around us. Nor is it a word that fully defines the complexity of knowledge systems we have had of the world around us…For tribal peoples, our relationships and kinship with the alive world is simply called *tradition*," (Hogan, 2013: 18-19). I personally identify my spiritual beliefs as "animist."

2.Complex systems understandings and traditional ecological knowledge

Over the past 25 years, the terms "traditional ecological knowledge" (TEK) or "Indigenous Knowledge (IK) have been used to describe the animist belief systems and complex systems understandings[8] of indigenous and local peoples (Berkes, 1993; Berkes and Folke, 1998; Folke et al., 1998; Ghosh et al., 2005; Maffi, 1999; Verschuuren, 2006). Various scholars have defined this framework in different ways: Berkes defines traditional ecological knowledge as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment," (Berkes, 2012: 17). Inglis defines traditional ecological knowledge as "the knowledge base acquired by indigenous and local peoples over many hundreds of years through direct contact with the environment [that] includes an intimate and detailed knowledge of plants, animals, and natural phenomena, the development and use of appropriate technologies for hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry, and a holistic knowledge, or 'world view' which parallels the scientific discipline of ecology," (Inglis, 1993: vi). A core component of TEK is that "Indigenous knowledge systems have continued to unabashedly discuss the metaphysical," (Johnson and Murton, 2007: 125).

Indigenous scholars' definitions of their own worldviews and knowledge systems reveal the deeper foundations of TEK.[9] Kimmerer describes how: "TEK includes an ethic of reciprocal respect and obligations between humans and the nonhuman world. In indigenous science, nature is subject, not object…Traditional ecological knowledge has value not only for the wealth of biological information it contains but for the cultural framework of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility in which it is embedded" (Kimmerer, 2002: 432). Cajete explains how, "In indigenous epistemology, a thing is understood only when it is understood with all aspects of human experience, that is, the mind, body, emotion, and spirit" (Cajete 1994: 43).

At the root of TEK are complex systems understandings – and an awareness that as humans depend upon and care for nature, nature also cares for and depends upon human stewardship (Anderson, 2005; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Such understandings motivate people to carefully manage their local ecosystems to sustain the abundance and flourishing of all species and entities (Pierotti and Wildcat, 2000). Indeed, an increasing number of scholars have marshalled evidence proving that humans have modified ecosystems greatly for millennia - and that such human modification has positively impacted local biodiversity (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, Anderson, 2005, and Adom 2016.).

Part of the power of indigenous cosmologies and complex knowledge systems is that they are often grounded in stories, which are "made up of extremely complex, finely coded information on human subsistence and infused with dramatic elements that ensure their transmission, engaging the heart with the mind," (Fernandez-Llamazares and Cabeza, 2017:2). Scholars have found that such stories "connect local people to their land, and include information about the site itself, the oral history of the surrounding area and communities; knowledge about spirits, people, animals, and plants, as well as the medicinal or curative properties of certain plants, springs, and soils," (Samakov and Berkes, 2017: 433). Such stories (and the cosmology they embody), can be told again and again, passing through the generations, translating information, rules of conduct, and complex cosmologies into coherent narratives that can be more easily integrated into community members' psyches and worldviews, ensuring intergenerational transmission of institutional memory (Fernandez-Llamazares and Cabeza, 2017).

[8] The study of "complex systems" is a scientific approach that investigates how relationships and interactions between a system's myriad parts give rise to its overall behavior – as well as how the overall system functions. I use this term to equalize the constructs behind traditional knowledge with those used in western science.

[9] It is critical to note that there is tension concerning the right to research and write about TEK, as indigenous academics and activists have moved to reclaim anthropological descriptions of their own beliefs and knowledge systems from Western observers. McGregor notes that "It did not occur to me early on in my TEK journey that there was a very good reason why I did not hear this term used by Aboriginal people." She explains how: "Upon witnessing this surge of interest amongst outside groups, however well intentioned, some Indigenous Peoples have characterized it as the ultimate form of colonialism: '*You have taken our lands; now you are after our minds,*' (McGregor, 2004: 44, emphasis added). McGregor concludes that: "One of the most common complaints about the failure or ineffectiveness of bringing TEK to bear in environmental and resource management decision-making is that 'doing' TEK in the dominant, Eurocentric mindset basically boils down to extracting knowledge from Aboriginal people. For Aboriginal people this issue presents a rather disturbing dilemma: they wish to share knowledge, but the context has changed and knowledge now has to be protected to avoid exploitation" (McGregor, 2004: 397).

3. Rules, taboos, and protocols to honour, protect and steward sacred natural sites

Intrinsic to indigenous complex systems understandings are prohibitions, protocols and rules that apply to every facet of humans' relationship with the natural world.[10] Such rules and protocols generally exist to protect, serve or uphold certain agreements with or promises to the land and spirits or deities of that land, or the plants and animals living there (Vipat and Bharucha, 2014; Singh et al., 2107). In a relational world, one approaches each facet of the wild, natural world politely, asking permission and enquiring how it would like to be treated, and receives instructions, either directly, or in signs or dreams (McGregor, 2004). Indeed, originally, these rules may have been directly transmitted to the local human population by the animal, plant, mountain, water body, or other being that they pertain to; a clear communication of how humans should relate to them. Such "requests" may then eventually turn into rules over time as they pass from generation to generation through stories and teachings. These rules, which may also change to accommodate ecological or societal changes, are often woven into the fabric of society, supporting both collective adherence to those rules and the sharing of knowledge and understanding between community members.

Such rules may be categorized according to whether they are positive drivers or negative drivers. Positive drivers tend to be more holistic, and promise prosperity, health, happiness, and fortune if followed, and include benefits or blessings that come from caring for a site or species (Byers et al., 2001: 208). For example, in Tibet, Shen et al. found that protecting the deities of mountains and lakes, and respecting all forms of life is believed to "benefit the wellbeing of local people, their farmlands and livestock and accumulate merit for individuals in pursuit of eternal happiness," (Shen et al. 2012: 13).

Negative drivers, or taboos, restrict certain kinds of human interactions with the local landscape and all non-human entities within it - and threaten illness, death and devastation if these mandates are broken. (Colding and Folke, 2001; Amster, 2008: 83). Yaw argues that in indigenous communities in Africa, taboos are the cornerstone of local social orders, including management and governance of sacred natural sites (Yaw, 2011), while Chemhuru and Masaka hold that taboos are pedagogical tools aimed at promoting desirable environmental ethics and behaviour, and state that "even though they may appear, on the surface, to be simple prohibitions on unsustainable use of certain aspects of nature, such as sacred sites, mountains, rivers, pools, and some nonhuman animals" taboos are moral injunctions that "inform an 'environmental ethic' that emphasizes a deep ecological awareness" and promote good relations between human beings and nature (Chemhuru and Masaka, 2010: 122). Taken together, a society's taboos may not only protect sacred natural sites and species, but also prevent community members from engaging in acts detrimental to local ecosystems and their community's overall wellbeing.

Notably, in many cultures, breaking a taboo may not only harm the offender but the wider society as well, which may be punished with droughts, sickness, and other difficulties (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013; Chemhuru and Masaka, 2010). Describing the underpinnings of rules relating to ecological protection and sacred natural sites among the Asante in Ghana, Adom explains how people's cosmological beliefs "in the Supreme Deity, ancestors, spirits, animism as well as sorcery and witchcraft" instil both fear and reverence, which together combine to ensure that people do not abuse local natural resources – not only within sacred sites, but across the entire landscape – so as not to face "spiritual and physical repercussions from the spirits" (Adom, 2016: 53). Widely accepted taboos often result in high levels of compliance. In their

[10] The rules governing the interactions between humans and the more-than-human world may be classified according to the relationships and practices they are guiding. Scholars' various classifications may be summarized as follows: 1) Rules to ensure the regeneration and abundance of species (for example, such rules may include prohibitions of killing young, pregnant or lactating animas, or animals found giving birth, or rules that restrict hunting of certain species to specific seasons to allow breeding, or which restrict hunting of particularly vulnerable species only at certain times of day, or in certain locations); 2) Rules designed to increase the heterogeneity of species within an ecosystem (for example, no cutting of fruit trees, no cutting of live trees, only deadwood, no pulling certain medicinal plants by the roots); 3) Rules concerning the protection of water and soil quality (such as prohibitions against farming or cutting trees along riverbanks to ensure against erosion, or of washing or bathing in areas where drinking water is collected, or rules designed to allow fields to lie fallow to regenerate soil quality); 4) Rules designed to ensure the resilience of the ecosystem overall (for example rules or ceremonies concerning the controlled burning of landscapes); 5) Rules for access to, conduct within, and stewardship of sacred sites; and 6) Rules for honouring ancestors, deities and spirits, among others. (See e.g. Abdullahi, 2013; Colding and Folke, 200;, Gadgil, Berkes and Folke, 1993; Jones et al. 2008)

research on taboos, Colding and Folke find that **"**transaction costs, or 'the costs of protecting rights and policing and enforcing agreements' are kept low by the inherent enforcement characteristics of informal institutions" (Colding and Folke, 2001: 595; Etiendem et al., 2011).

While many cultures have specific rules for the use and management of non-sacred common pool resources, the rules surrounding sacred natural sites are more extensive, beginning with strong access prohibitions and including rules for how one may enter the overall sacred area as well as rules for how to conduct oneself within the site. These rules generally require that people: respectfully travel to and arrive at a sacred site (including preparing for days in advance through fasting, remaining abstinent, or observing special diets); clean themselves or undertake ablutions before entering; bring gifts or offerings for the spirits that live in or guard the site; say the proper prayers or proclamations; not litter, cause damage to, or destroy the site in any way; not engage in offensive behaviour such as swearing, drinking alcohol, having sexual intercourse, or defecating, etc.; and not take anything from the site without being given express permission from the deities or spirits of the site, among others. There also often rules that pertain to certain groups; for example, many cultures have rules that forbid menstruating women to enter sacred natural sites. (Samakov and Berkes, 2017; Singh et al., 2017; Adom 2018; Alohou et al., 2016; Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010).

4. The human and nonhuman institutions managing and governing sacred sites

However, rules alone are not enough to induce people to change behaviour (Rowcliffe et al. 2004); no matter how deeply engrained in the culture they have become, rules must be backed up by institutions respected by the people they govern. Such institutions ensure rules are known and enforced – and punish those who fail to comply with necessary protocols or break taboos. As described above, the entities responsible for making rules, monitoring and enforcing rules, and punishing transgressions or awarding compliance may be either or both *human* spiritual leaders or groups of elders, or *non-human* ancestors, spirits, or deities (Colding and Folke, 2001).

Indeed, what makes sacred sites so biologically flourishing may be the fact that in addition to being used, accessed and managed by the human world, they are populated, "owned" and "managed" by non-human and supernatural beings, which are (or are perceived to be) all-seeing, all knowing, and capable of bestowing gifts, extracting "payments," or imposing penalties in a manner not possible by humans alone. In other words, because the "community" of sacred sites owner-users consciously includes a mixture of human beings, non-human beings, spirits, ancestors, and deities, all of whom have "rules enforcement powers," the human members of the community adhere more completely to rules regarding conservation and sustainable natural resource use than they do when governance is held by human institutions alone – and this adherence results in the maintenance of biodiversity. Indeed, in certain contexts, nonhuman governance may be *more* effective than human governance, depending on the strengths and weaknesses of those human institutions.

The nonhuman governing institutions of sacred sites come in multiple forms: sacred sites may be governed by ancestors, by one main deity, or by many related deities or spirits. They may be governed by the spirits of plants, animals, mountains, and water, or by ancestors, deities and spirits who take the form of plants, animals, water and stones (Byers et al*.* 2001; Studley, 2019; Adom, 2018; Vipat and Bharucha, 2014; Cocks, et al., 2012; Sarma and Barpujari, 2011). For example, in Zimbabwe, the Shona believe that after death, the spirits of family members return to live among their descendants to protect them. Sometimes these ancestors take the form of wild animals who guard sacred places and ensure good relations between the land and the local people (Byers *et al.* 2001). Cocks et. al. report how among the Xhosa of South Africa, people believe that the sacred forests are the homes of the spirits, much the same way that human homes belongs to their owners. They quote one respondent as saying, "When these people chop the forest the ancestors become angry. You would also be unhappy if they came and broke your house down!" (Cocks, et al., 2012: 4). Similarly, in the Mulshi region of India, Vipat and Bharucha found that: "The preservation of groves is a result of strong ancient beliefs that any damage to the grove would anger the deity who would take revenge on the intruder who desecrates its integrity," (Vipat and Bharucha, 2014: 3).

Nonhuman governance, monitoring and punishment of transgressors may serve two functions. First, when the area of land is large and difficult to monitor, it may simply be more practical and efficient to turn such monitoring over to the supernatural world – and to local species, who are already present in the area, watching and feeling all that transpires. Second, non-human monitoring and punishment may be more socially tenable in small, intimate communities, where being caught, penalized and shamed by other humans may threaten the fragile social dynamics of small villages (Sasaoka and Laumonier, 2012).

The sanctity of sacred natural sites may also be predicated upon the intimate, reciprocal relationships *between* human leaders and supernatural entities: on their own or in tandem with nonhuman entities, human governing bodies control access and use of sacred natural sites, monitor rule compliance, enforce penalties for transgressions, and ensure that sacred knowledge and understandings are respected (Vershuuren, 2018; Colding and Folke, 2001). These institutions may be individual leaders, groups of elders, shamans, or other individuals who mediate between the human and non-human world (Rutte, 2011). Although their roles differ widely across cultures and ecosystems, these guardians' or custodians' responsibilities generally include protecting the site from damage; keeping it clean; allowing or refusing entrance, access and use; guiding visitors about the rules to be followed; educating visitors about the site's origins and history; and conducting ceremonies or helping visitors to carry out rituals (Samakov and Berkes, 2017; Sasaoka and Laumonier, 2012; Shen, et al., 2012; Aitpaeva, 2013). The strength and integrity of human governing bodies is key to the maintenance of sacred sites. Eghenter describes how, in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, "Communities that show a strong tradition of *tana ulen* (spiritual forest management) are those where the role and influence of the customary chief appear to have been prominent and decisive."

When community beliefs concerning the supernatural enforcement of rules and protocols surrounding sacred natural sites weaken, the strength and integrity of the human governing bodies are key to the maintenance of sacred sites' biodiversity and power (Eghenter, 2000). However, human governance institutions change depending on the power of community leaders, the degree to which they choose to preserve and protect cultural beliefs, and the degree to which they both follow the rules themselves and enforce the rules when community members break them, among many other factors (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Some of the forces leading to the breakdown of sacred site rule-enforcement are described in the following section.

C. Why is strengthening and revitalizing the cosmology and rituals related to sacred sites necessary?

Today, the sanctity and ecological flourishing of sacred natural sites are under threat. (Bhagwat and Rutte, 2006; Chandrakanth et al., 2004). In 2005, Indigenous leaders in the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues identified various drivers of the decline of respectful and honouring stewardship of sacred natural sites and the environment overall, including: "cultural assimilation, loss of traditional territories, destruction of ecosystems, in and out migration, poverty, climate change, urbanization, and the death of community elders" – as well as the interactions between these various forces (Cristancho and Vining, 2009, citing UNPFII, 2005). Similarly, Rutte's 2011 desk review of all published research on sacred sites to that date identified how:

1. The cultural assimilation of animistic peoples into mainstream religions has contributed to the degradation of sacred natural sites;
2. The advent of 'modernization' and new market economies are combining to make traditional spiritual values less relevant, and, as a result, sacred natural sites are increasingly seen as open-access resources;
3. Rising competition over natural resources is leading to a decline in local rule compliance, and, as a result, community forests, watersheds and grazing lands are increasingly used by individuals for exploitation and cultivation of cash crops (Rutte, 2011).

Indeed, various factors inter-relate to result in the breakdown of the sanctity of sacred natural sites, each impacting upon the other in a vicious cycle. Intra-community drivers may not always be internal forces *per se*, but rather the reverberations of external influences that have myriad intra-community impacts; external forces combine and ignite change within communities and families, eroding relationships and cultural systems that previously functioned to ensure respectful stewardship of sacred sites and local ecosystems (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Pretty et. al., 2009). These forces are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Forces that lead or are leading to the degradation of sacred natural sites.

EXTERNAL FORCES	EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL FORCES	INTRA-COMMUNITY FORCES
1. Historical and present colonization, imperialism and attendant oppression and violence 2. Lack of secure property rights 3. Commercial resource extraction (mining, logging and resulting pollution) 4. State-led large-scale infrastructure projects 5. Westernized education and attendant language loss	6. Capitalism, globalization and related changes to the local/ regional/national economy 7. Climate change and population growth, and an attendant rise in competition for increasingly scarce resources 8. Illegal local resource extraction (poaching, alluvial mining, pit sawing, etc.) 9. Privatization of lands previously held communally 10. Increasing prevalence of mainstream religions	11. Shift from animism to mainstream religions and science 12. Weakened leadership 13. Decline in transmission of traditional ecological knowledge from elders to youth 14. Aspiration for consumer lifestyles and attendant assimilation to dominant culture 15. Rural-urban migration, especially by youth **Adapted from Pretty et.al, 2009*

While all of these forces are indeed leading to the decline of sacred sites' biodiversity, I would suggest an alternative conceptualization of how communities who previously adhered to indigenous cosmologies and respectfully stewarded their sacred natural sites and local ecosystems slowly cease to strictly adhere to the rules, protocols and practices that maintain sacred sites' flourishing biodiversity. Specifically, in a culture with strongly held belief systems concerning how to be in right relation with a fully animate world, rule adherence and honouring stewardship of sacred sites breaks down when:

1. A culture loses sovereignty, the right to self-govern, and control over what happens within the boundaries of its lands when outsiders come in and impose external systems;
2. Beliefs are eroded by the imposition of - or slow conversion to - mainstream and monotheistic religions;
3. Other ways of relating to the world (capitalist market economies, western educational constructs) gain precedence *and* elders do not pass on beliefs in a manner meets youth where they are;
4. Human leadership is weak, with leaders losing credibility or failing to enforce rules; and
5. There is local resource scarcity *and* community members observe others breaking the rules and suffering no supernatural or human-enforced consequences.

These are not hard and fast rules; religious syncretism frequently results from the meetings of two cultures, as humans tend to hold very tightly to their ancestral belief systems when alternative beliefs are forced upon them, practicing such beliefs secretly or privately, putting them "behind" the enforced iconography, and/or simply holding both as true. Likewise, there are myriad stories of people who go hungry rather than break taboos against eating certain animals, etc. it is actually quite difficult to break down a culture's spiritual values, rules and practices, and often takes a combination of all of these factors to bring about a decline in the reverent maintenance of sacred sites and the "disenchantment" of the wild: a "perfect storm" of more cracks in a culture than that culture can repair. These forces are briefly described below.

1. A culture loses its sovereignty, right to self-govern, and control over its lands

With few exceptions, the colonial/imperial project has at its core the extraction of local natural resources. Unlawfully claiming indigenous peoples' land and resources often requires the engineered weakening of their sovereignty, internal governance structures, and belief systems – and is often accompanied by a forced assimilation into the imperial invaders' culture, religion, and economic system. This also happens *within* modern nation-states, when the non-local institutions who hold power and authority do not recognize a community's land and natural resource rights; usurp local institutions' power to govern and manage community lands; allow outsiders to unsustainably extract natural resources; and impose laws made in the national capital that may not align with local realities, interests, or needs.

Indigenous academics have written at length about how the colonial project – and the resulting settler societies that have resulted – played, and continue to play, a significant role in the erosion of their traditional knowledge and spiritual practices. For example, Simpson describes how: "the colonial powers attacked virtually every aspect of our knowledge systems during the most violent periods of the past five centuries by rendering our spirituality and ceremonial life illegal, attempting to assimilate our children and destroy our languages through the residential school system, outlawing traditional governance, and destroying the lands and waters to which we are intrinsically tied," Simpson, 2004: 374). Describing the decline in transmission of indigenous knowledge within African cultures under colonialism, Olanya describes how "indigenous knowledge systems were altered, disrupted and replaced by colonial and state practices," (Olanya, 2013: 120).

A central component of the colonial/imperial project has been the invalidation of indigenous land and property rights, so as to illegally claim lands and expedite the extraction of natural resources. As a result of colonial legal frameworks, whose vestiges remain within today's laws, an estimated 90% of the 2.5 billion rural and indigenous people do not have formal, recognized rights to their lands.[11] Without legal recognition or documentation, communities' lands, livelihoods, and cultures are more susceptible to exploitation by those with political, legal, and economic power. When rural communities lack formal legal rights to their lands – in particular the sacred sites and common wetlands, forests and grazing areas that they depend upon for their livelihoods and household survival – they struggle to protect them, as these areas are often the first to be allocated to investors, claimed by local elites, and appropriated for state development projects.[12]

In other instances, indigenous peoples' ancestral lands and sacred sites have been forcibly taken from them and gazetted as "protected areas" or "conservation areas," to which the indigenous owners have then been forbidden access.[13] Government agencies then manage these parks and areas according to officially-dictated environmental standards, prohibiting the indigenous landowners from entering into the area to continue to

[11] Oxfam, International Land Coalition, Rights and Resources Initiative (2016), *Common Ground. Securing Land Rights and Safeguarding the Earth*, Oxford, United Kingdom, p. 39.

[12] When the land rights of the traditional owners, users, and managers of sacred sites and local ecosystems are not formally recognized by those in power, it can be very difficult for them to successfully stop outsiders from coming in and claiming, often in bad faith, their ancestral lands and the natural resources located upon those lands. Often, investors and government officials seeking land for projects either do not consult communities and ask for their free, prior informed consent (FPIC) for an investment or infrastructure development project. (Http://www.fao.org/indigenous-peoples/our-pillars/fpic/en/) A study of communities' experiences responding to external requests for their lands found that regardless of whether or not they have a document for their lands, how well they know their rights, or how strong their leadership is, rural communities rarely have the power to resist requests for their lands by government officials, international investors, and national elites (Knight, 2019: 36). In the name of "investment" and "economic development," whole communities are often forcibly removed from their lands or barred from entering the forests, wetlands, grazing areas and watersheds that they depend upon for their survival, and the sacred natural sites critical to the practice of their spiritual beliefs. In places where communities do resist, indigenous land and water defenders often face violent persecution. (See e.g. 'At What Cost?," Global Witness, 2017, available at: https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/at-what-cost/).

[13] For at least the past 150 years through to today, governments have been creating national reserves, parks, conservation areas, and protected areas to safeguard wildlife and particularly beautiful or endangered ecosystems. More than 12% of the world's surface has been set aside into more than 100,000 protected areas. By some estimates, around 50% of these protected areas encompass the lands and territories of indigenous peoples. While conservation and environmental protections are necessary, the creation of many of these parks or conserved areas involved dispossessing indigenous peoples from their lands, sometimes violently and often without due process or adequate compensation (Amend and Amend, 1992). Once created, the government agencies managing parks often prohibit the original indigenous land owners from entering into the area to gather natural resources necessary to their survival, carry out land-based religious or spiritual practices, or maintain their livelihoods.
See: https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/rethinkingcommunitybasedforestmanagementinthecongobasinnovember2014.pdf

gather natural resources necessary to their survival, maintain sacred natural sites and carry out land-based religious or spiritual practices, or earn their livelihood. Indigenous peoples who try to re-enter their ancestral lands for these reasons may be criminally penalised, punished, or fined.[14] Losing sovereign management rights over sacred natural sites may make it very difficult for stewarding peoples to control how such sites are accessed and used or to enforce rules protecting biodiversity and respectful relations with the non-human entities related to each site.

The impacts of such forces are significant and pervasive, and have led to dispossession, displacement, increased competition for now-scarce lands and natural resources, weakening of intra-community protections for the rights of vulnerable and minority groups, and feelings of profound grief and loss.[15] Local biological diversity is often degraded; local rivers, lakes, air and soils may be polluted; community health may suffer; community members may no longer be able to pursue their livelihoods or access resources necessary to household survival; access to sacred areas may be blocked; and outsiders (for example company employees) may bring violence, alcohol and drugs, theft, and violent crimes into the community. Simpson details the community-level impacts of loss of access to indigenous lands:

> In present times, environmental destruction of Indigenous lands facilitated by state governments and instituted by large multinational corporations continues to remove Indigenous Peoples from our lands and prevent Indigenous Peoples from living our knowledge… [As a result], the community loses food, medicines, and places to hunt, fish, and gather. Families lose opportunities to travel on the land and to be together. Animals…lose places to live and food to eat. When spiritual places are destroyed - and with them opportunities to maintain alliances with the essential forces of nature - the very alliances that are responsible for the transmission of Indigenous Knowledge are also destroyed. Opportunities for knowledge holders to pass their knowledge down to younger generations become fewer: as people have fewer reasons to go out on the land, there are fewer occasions for children to observe, experience, and learn from the natural world. The land is humiliated, and since Indigenous Peoples and our knowledge are part of the land, we all suffer (Simpson, 2004: 378-379).

2. Beliefs are eroded by the imposition of/conversion to mainstream religions

While missionaries have long roamed the globe — in ancient Europe, sacred groves were destroyed with the arrival of Christianity[16] — over the past two hundred years the influence of monotheistic religions and associated western/individualistic ideologies have penetrated more deeply into even the most remote rural communities, resulting in the destruction or degradation of sacred natural sites (Alohou et al., 2016; Doda-Doffana, 2019). Describing their influence in India, Sarma and Barpujari summarize how: "The disruptive impact of the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries on the social and religious ecology of the people of Arunachal Pradesh…has been completely destructive of the tribal culture. To

[14] See: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/aug/28/exiles-human-cost-of-conservation-indigenous-peoples-eco-tourism

[15] For example, as land becomes more scarce, customary protections for women's land rights are increasingly being disregarded and "forgotten;" fearing loss of land, customary leaders and families move from more flexible, negotiable systems of land holding to more rigid, guarded interpretations of "tradition" and the land claims of less powerful family members become more tenuous. As a result, women are losing their bargaining powers both among their husbands' kin and within their own families as well (Knight, 2010, 2012; Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003; Peters 2004; McAuslan, 2000; Adoko and Levine, 2008; Yngstrom 2002).

[16] It should be noted that many of these forces are not necessarily new or "modern": the "Epic of Gilgamesh," written more than 5,000 years ago, tells the story of how King Gilgamesh brutally murdered Humbaba, the hairy, giant monster who guarded Lebanon's vast cedar forests, so that he could log the forests for the expansion of his empire. A recently recovered tablet has revealed the biodiversity of the forest Humbaba guarded; only once he had been killed was it possible to desecrate the forest for Gilgamesh's personal enrichment and fame. The new text says: "They stood there marveling at the forest, observing the height of the cedars, observing the way into the forest. Where Ḫumbaba came and went there was a track, the paths were in good order and the way was well trodden. They were gazing at the Cedar Mountain, dwelling of gods, throne-dais of goddesses: [on the] face of the land the cedar was proffering its abundance, sweet was its shade, full of delight. [All] tangled was the thorny undergrowth, the forest a thick canopy, cedars (and) ballukku-trees were [so entangled,] it had no ways in. For one league on all sides cedars [sent forth] saplings, cypresses… [Through] all the forest a bird began to sing [...] were answering one another, a constant din was the noise,[A solitary] tree-cricket set off a noisy chorus.. [...] were singing a song, .. A wood pigeon was moaning, a turtle dove calling in answer. [At the call of] the stork, the forest exults, [at the cry of] the francolin, the forest exults in plenty. [Monkey mothers] sing aloud, a youngster monkey shrieks [like a band] of musicians and drummers, daily they bash out a rhythm in the presence of Ḫumbaba." (Alrawi et al., 2014)

them everything which is not Christian is 'heathen' and, [as a result of their conversion efforts] some of the finest aspects of tribal life have been abandoned," (Sarma and Barpujari, 2011: 8).

Such trends are not solely the domain of monotheistic religions like Christianity and Islam: in Tibet, Studley describes how Bon and Tibetan Buddhist institutions have worked to undermine local indigenous belief systems, and which have had the effect of "de-wilding, de-souling, subjugating and re-mapping nature." (Studley 2019: 33) Similarly, throughout India, the original sacred sites remain, but in the place of sacred trees and rituals to honour nature-based deities, temples to mainstream gods have been erected, and the rituals changed to reflect Hindu worship (Kalam, 1996; Chandran and Hughes, 1997; Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010).

While people who convert to mainstream religions often continue to adhere to their animist spiritual beliefs alongside Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism (or practice a kind of religious syncretism), as the generations pass, adherence to "modern" religions often generally gains precedence over animist or land-based practices (Sarma and Barpujari, 2011; Amster, 2008). Such shifts in cosmology often have negative conservation outcomes: for example, in Meghalaya, India, in a study of the degradation of 79 sacred groves, 95% of respondents interviewed attributed this degradation to the replacement of their tribal religions and cultures with Christianity (Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010, citing Tiwari et al. 1998). Similarly, among the Iban in Kalimantan, Indonesia, conversion to Christianity has resulted in people flagrantly abandoning taboos that protected sacred species (Rily, 2010).

Often, those who have fully absorbed and embraced monotheistic religions (and modern scientific thinking) turn to mocking the indigenous spirituality and knowledge of their ancestors. In particular, mainstream religion and modern science often negatively impact young people's concepts of their culture's spiritual beliefs, leading them to dismiss them as "old people's superstitions" (Yuan et al., 2014; Adom, 2018; Sarma and Barpujari, 2011).[17] For example, among the Karbi of India, Sarma and Barpujari chronicle how while in some villages people, old and young alike, hold very tightly to their cultural heritage and belief systems, in other villages that have been heavily "Christianized,"

> Youths exhibited a condescending attitude towards the traditional Karbi beliefs and displayed a sense of superiority in being part of a much 'modern' religious belief system….[they had] been taught to despise their past and as a result a strong inferiority complex has been created….Many young people interviewed tended to dismiss the indigenous practices as mere superstitions of the mostly illiterate, older people. Some youths exhibited a sense of shame regarding traditional Karbi practices of ritual sacrifices and belief in "so many gods" (Sarma and Barpujari, 2011: 3).

Similarly, Amster describes how among the Kelabit people of Borneo:

> As Christian converts, much of the former animistic orientation has been forgotten, except among the very eldest Kelabit, and virtually none of the pre-conversion ritual complex is practiced today. Indeed, for the most part, today, the former beliefs are highly stigmatized and often cited as examples of Satan's influence on the Kelabit prior to conversion — with discourses about headhunting and infanticide in particular being used as examples of how they have since emerged from the time of darkness when they were under Satan's spell or followed *adet Satan* (the way or 'custom' of Satan)." (Amster, 2008: 77).[18]

[17] Notably, this is not true in every culture; in particular, in settler colonies like Canada, the United States, Australia and South Africa where persecution and disenfranchisement is on-going, local cultures and beliefs have withstood centuries of severe repression and continued to thrive. For example, in South Africa, Cocks et al. describe how: "Despite the attraction of urban life, village people of different ages still had strong cultural associations with nature and remained hopeful that their children would maintain these ties. [One respondent said:] "Our children must go to the forest: they must know about everything in the forest; everything about being Xhosa is from the forest – it is the *izithethe* [the manner of doing things] of Xhosa people. (80 year old man)…[Another respondent explained how:] "I am showing my three-year old son traditional medicines from the forest. It is important that he knows these things because it is part of being Xhosa!" (30 –year old man), (Cocks, et al., 2012: 5-6).

[18] Notably, bits of indigenous cosmology stubbornly remain; Amster found that "Bits of folklore about the past and former beliefs persist even among the younger generation, and those that do remain are quite revealing. For instance, a common former belief and one still widely known among Kelabit … is the belief that if one laughed at an animal it could lead to calamity and disorder." (Amster, 2008: 77)

3. Capitalist market economies and western education gain precedence *and* intergenerational knowledge transfer breaks down

Indigenous communities are just as susceptible to market forces as any other society when exposed to the opportunities provided by capitalism (Xu et al., 2005). Globally, scholars have documented how, as indigenous communities are integrated into the global economy - within which land and natural resources are considered tradable, transactable commodities - local understandings shift over time to align with these conceptions: rather than being en-spirited, sentient beings, suddenly plants and minerals come to be thought of as "resources" to be extracted for personal profit (Olanya, 2013; Chandrakanth et al., 2004; Chouin, 2002; Sarma and Barpujari, 2011; Xu et al., 2005; Olanya, 2013). For example, Baggethun and Reyes-García found that among the Tsimane people of Bolivia, individuals who were relatively isolated from the market economy held and shared more traditional ecological knowledge than those people living in villages closer to towns (Baggethun and Reyes-García, 2013). As a result, "sacred natural sites may become open-access resources…because the spiritual value becomes irrelevant with the advent of 'modernization,' or because the economic value dominates the spiritual value due to new market situations," (Rutte, 2011: 5). Indeed, Knight et al. document how, in negotiations between communities concerning the boundaries of their lands, "the youth tended to see land as a tradable and negotiable commodity ('something a house is built on') while elders tended to define land as 'what our forefathers left us' or 'where our forefathers are buried,' attaching strong emotional, historical and territorial sentiment" (Knight et al., 2012: 67).

On their own, new economic models do not necessarily erode traditional beliefs or lead to the de-sanctification of sacred sites and the spiritual belief systems that sustain their biodiversity. Rather, the degradation of sacred sites is often caused by trends that often accompany capitalist systems, most of all a decline in the transmission of cultural values and indigenous knowledge from elders to youth.[19] Researchers have catalogued various interrelated factors that lead to the youth no longer learning traditional knowledge, including:

1. Western education, within which traditional knowledge is not only not taught, but may be frowned upon or actively discouraged;
2. Diminished time available to spend in nature with parent and elders due to children's formal schooling and parents' wage employment;
3. Erosion or loss of native languages (due to schooling in non-native languages), which makes it challenging for youth to understand the language in which elders tell traditional stories or sing traditional songs that contain knowledge content;
4. Western religious influences, which may condemn indigenous beliefs, practices and knowledge, and which may lead to changes in value systems;
5. Changes in livelihood practices and adoption of new technologies (from subsistence agriculture to commerce, or Western jobs), and access to modern inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides;
6. Land loss (often forcibly taken) leading to youth's out-migration to urban areas, where there may not be elders who can teach them; and
7. Increased contact with urban centres, national trends and the market economy, due to infrastructure development (Ohmagari and Berkes, 1997; Cristancho and Vining, 2009; Pearce et al., 2011; Baggethun and Reyes-García, 2013; Bruyere et al., 2016; Vipat and Bharucha, 2014).[20]

Perhaps more than any other factor, the shift from nature-based learning from parents and elders to school-based western education has significantly impacted young peoples' traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual worldviews. Traditional knowledge is largely transmitted through nature-based instruction - which requires considerable time with trusted elders in the wild (Setalaphruk and Price, 2007). In many cultures,

[19] The United Nations defines people between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States. (Secretary-General's Report to the General Assembly, A/36/215, 1981). In other cultures, and contexts, "youth" may include adults up to age 35.

[20] See also the United Nations Environmental Program's Convention on Biological Diversity's "Report on threats to the practice and transmission of traditional knowledge regional report: Africa." 1999. http://aippnet.org/report-on-threats-to-thepractice-and-transmission-of-traditional-knowledge-regional-report-asia/

elders and parents traditionally taught youth the skills and knowledge they needed to live a prosperous and thriving life. For example, among the Inuit, Pearce et al. explain how: "In traditional Inuit education, learning and living were the same things" (Pearce et al., 2011: 271). They report that among young men 18–34 years of age, 56% of 83 skills were learned by hands-on experience and another 17% were learned by observation only. Fathers, or both parents, were reported to be the youth's principle teachers; they conclude that the determining factor as to whether respondents learned land skills, regardless of the level of formal schooling achieved, was the availability of a teacher, namely a father or grandfather (Pearce et al., 2011:275,281). Similarly, describing intergenerational knowledge transfer efforts among Cree women in Canada:

> Many elders pointed out that bush skills were not taught by formal education in the abstract. Their way was 'learning by doing' through apprenticeship. The apprenticeship started as soon as a Cree child learned to walk; she was expected to help with and share in the work of the bush camp….At the same time, the child acquired the Cree values of self-reliance, independence, and competence, and also of sharing and cooperation. Children learned skills from parents, grandparents, older siblings, and members of the extended family with whom they camped… (Ohmagari and Berkes, 1997:206).

Overall, the data indicate that the more years a young person has spent in school, the less traditional knowledge he or she acquires. Western-type education, which requires up to eight hours a day in a classroom as well as homework, monopolizes young peoples' time and energy, leaving little time to learn from family members and community elders (Cristancho and Vining, 2009). Describing the impacts of formal education, an elder Inuit respondent described how she perceived these changes among the youth:

> We learned from our elders, parents and grandparents, and we carried these teachings with us. Even though [formal] education is important, the kids go from morning all day and the connection with the parents is lost... It is good to learn the modern age, but the traditions and culture are being lost at a fast rate. They [kids] don't know about being out on the land and don't know the language. Although they take our kids out on language programs and land camps, this is not enough. The teaching must be on-going," (Pearce et al., 2011: 283).

The impacts of such trends on young people's traditional knowledge have been widely documented (Yen, 2014; Ohmagari and Berkes 1997; Etiendem et al., 2011). A study among Taiwanese youths found that traditional knowledge was negatively correlated with the number of years a person had been in school (Srithi et al., 2009), while among the Samburu of Kenya, researchers found that compared to *Moran*, adolescent boys who are initiated as herders, boys of the same age who were instead enrolled in school were less able to identify native plant species correctly (Bruyere and Lemungesi, 2016). Ohmagari and Berkes note that expert hunters have observed that among youth who spend many years in western schooling, there is a "reduced attention span and patience, and loss of observational powers, generally impairing one's ability to learn in the bush" (Ohmagari and Berkes, 1997: 216). In China, Yuan et al. (2014) documented how while in Yunnan Province, elders could easily recite all local traditional practices and related activities, and middle-aged people knew most of the practices as well, youth had only heard of 64% of such practices and activities, and had rarely personally participated in any traditional activities. And in Nunavet, Canada, Pearce *et al.* found that "Unlike older respondents, several younger respondents did not know where to hunt caribou, muskox, wolf, or polar bear, or where to set fox traps; nor did they know why they went to the hunting areas they used (this knowledge had been acquired by older respondents at an equivalent age)" (Pearce et al. 2011: 277).

Cristancho and Vining have documented how, in some parts of Guatemala and Colombia, it is not only the elders who are upset by these changes, but the youth as well. They quote two youth respondents in their early tenties who articulate their sense that their elders have abandoned them: "People who taught us that knowledge in the past have passed away. Now it is different…Now old people don't want to teach it to us, nor do they want to go to the forest with us fishing," and "Now our grandparents don't talk to young people…They don't transmit their knowledge. Slowly, they are forgetting it and new generations

don't know anything," (Cristancho and Vining, 2009: 241, 243).

Notably, youths' relationship to their cultures' beliefs, practices, understandings and knowledge is both an impact of the forces described above *and* a cause of future biodiversity decline (Cocks, et. al, 2012). Elders around the world are gravely concerned about this. For example, in India, Vipat and Baruch describe how "the local myths, stories, and religious rituals are gradually being homogenized by external influences…Thus ceremonial rituals such as the "Kaul" that had a strong controlling influence on resource extraction from sacred groves are not practiced by the younger generation. [As a result], the groves are slowly but surely being degraded or even severely damaged," (Vipat and Bharucha, 2014: 7). Similarly, Cristancho and Vining quote an elder headman of an Amazonian tribe as lamenting: "Our knowledge about the forest, the knowledge that allows us to survive in this environment, has vanished and I am really worried that the young people are not learning it. I don't know what is happening but we must solve this problem otherwise neither the forest nor our youth will survive…" (Cristancho and Vining, 2009: 229).

4. Human leadership weakens, with leaders losing credibility or failing to enforce rules

At the heart of the decline of respect for and honouring stewardship of sacred natural sites may be the erosion of strong, authentic local leadership. When leaders lose credibility or fail to enforce rules, such weak leadership can undermine even excellent rules and vibrant beliefs among community members and can contribute to the decline in elder-to-youth transmission of local knowledge and beliefs. For example, Adom describes the differences between two townships in Ghana - one with very weak leadership, and another with very strong leadership:

> [In the fist township,] a male elderly person urinating in the lake [was observed,] while others carelessly brought their bathing sponges, towels and soaps to bath directly in the Lake. Others threw refuse in the lake and poured food residues after washing their utensils into the lake…[One respondent said] "My ancestors are punishing us for not keeping the biodiversity resources in good condition. Our chief and the traditional council have failed us"… [In contrast, in another township, the] traditional council was insistent on the implementation of the Asante indigenous knowledge systems, especially in regulating the attitudes of residents toward the biodiversity resources in the environment. Strict punishments were given to culprits…The firm and strict sanctions ensured by the vibrant traditional council has made the township lavish with high taxas of biodiversity" (Adom et al., 2016: 70-73).

Similarly, Byers et al.'s study of sacred forests in Zimbabwe found that rates of forest loss were much higher in areas where traditional leadership had become relatively disempowered (Byers et al., 2001). They report that "when people realized that village heads were powerless to stop them" they encroached into the sacred forests, cutting down trees for firewood and opening areas for cultivation. Various factors combined to weaken peoples' respect for the local leaders that historically ensured the forests' sanctity and biodiversity, including: state policies undermining the authority of traditional leaders; a failure to strictly educate people migrating into the village about the boundaries of sacred lands and the rules governing them; and the "modernization" or corruption of spirit mediums, which has undermined their credibility (Byers et al., 2001).

5. Community members observe others breaking the rules and suffering no consequences

Between 1800 and 2020, the world's population ballooned from 990 million to roughly 7.75 billion,[21] with 25% of the population under the age of fifteen.[22] This increase is driving massive global demand for food and commodities and putting extreme pressure on already-scarce lands and natural resources. Meanwhile, climate change is dramatically shifting weather patterns, which are affecting crop production as changes in soil moisture, air temperature, and rainfall affect the ability of crops to reach maturity and be harvested.

[21] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/world-population-1750-2015-and-un-projection-until-2100. (accessed on 10 October 2020)
[22] https://www.statista.com/statistics/265759/world-population-by-age-and-region/

Rising temperatures and water scarcity is leading to soil erosion, desertification, salinization, and loss of peat soils, further impacting the capability of soils to support productive agriculture.[23] People living in arid regions are increasingly faced with drought, while wet regions are seeing more flooding.

These trends are leading to increasing competition for increasingly scarce resources, which has in turn led to a breakdown of the indigenous and local rules that have governed the sustainable use of common resources within communities, including the natural resources located near or within sacred natural sites (Peters, 2004; Chimhowu and Woodhouse, 2006). In Africa, where rural cooking is primarily done over a hearth fire, sacred forests and tree species are particularly under threat. For example, due to pressures related to population growth and associated resource scarcity, the sacred groves of Burkina Faso lost more than the half of their surface area from 1998 to 2007 (Juhe-Beaulaton, 2010), while in Benin, sacred groves have decreased by more than half during the last three decades (Alohou et al., 2016: 110). And, among the Acholi of Northern Uganda, despite profound regard for sacred forests - which are believed to be the domain of ancestor caretakers and are protected by strict taboos that prohibit tree cutting - in response to a severe wood shortage, species of trees that used to be taboo to fell are now being logged for timber and charcoal (Olanya, 2013).[24] Discussing this trend, Abdullahi reports how elderly respondents in Nigeria lamented that "three decades back, some tree species could not be used for firewood but nowadays, virtually any tree can be used due to carefree attitudes" (Abdullahi, 2013: 15).

However, even in times of scarcity, the desecration of sacred natural sites is likely only possible when people cease to fear the supernatural forces that have traditionally protected them. For example, Adom chronicles how, in one village in Ghana, loggers went into the sacred forests under the cover of night to illegally log timber, until some loggers were found dead one morning. Local people described this incident to him, attributing their deaths to "the venting of the wrath of the river deity and the ancestors." As a result, they informed him, the remaining remnant of forest was thereafter left undisturbed (Adom, 2018: 20). Despite the high value of timber, the "wrath of the deity and the ancestors" was strong enough to completely stop the illegal logging. Another respondent in a different village reported how "Some three men stubbornly went to cut some of the palm trees…to be used by them for alcoholic beverage, though it is tabooed. The Deity of the river materialized himself into a breed of bees and attacked them. They all fell sick for months as a result of their stubbornness" (Ibid.). It may be that local people will only break taboos that protect sacred natural sites and species when they feel that the more-than-human governing bodies are no longer enforcing penalties.

D. How to strengthen and revitalize protections for sacred natural sites?

The negative ecological impacts of these various forces – both within sacred natural sites and across local landscapes – include the extinction or near-extinction of plant, animal and insect species; pollution of waters, soils and air; erosion of riverbanks, leading to flooding; destruction of forests, leading to erosion, drought, and decreased soil quality; uncontrolled wildfires; decreased availability of plants used for traditional medicines, and many others (Rutte, 2011; Gadgil, 2018; Adom 2016; Doda Doffana, 2017). There are also myriad negative concomitant impacts on human relationships with the more-than-human world, and within our hearts and minds.

To halt or slow the degradation of sacred natural sites and attendant local cultures and cosmologies, it is necessary to proactively confront the forces and trends outlined above. Just as the cosmologies, knowledge and practices that function to protect sacred natural sites only break down when a confluence of forces combine, efforts to strengthen and revitalize sacred sites' flourishing biodiversity must also be multifaceted and diverse.[25] However, while the majority of published research on the impacts of declining

[23] http://www.soilnet.com/dev/page.cfm?pageid=secondary_functions_climate_c&loginas=anon_secondary

[24] Indeed, in Northern Uganda, there is currently a severe wood shortage; over the past ten years, wood for cooking fires has become so scarce - and has risen so swiftly in price – that there is no longer enough wood to make campfires, around which elders have traditionally passed on cultural stories to youth. (Judy Adoko and family, personal communication, 2011)

[25] To protect indigenous rights, a number of international legal instruments have been crafted, adopted and signed onto, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage, ILO 169, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

enforcement of traditional conservation protocols for sacred natural sites conclude with recommendations for how to strengthen and preserve indigenous knowledge and related resource management strategies, the literature does not abound with *examples* of how such interventions have been accomplished, or what their impacts have been. The foregoing investigation aims to contribute to this nascent area of study.

Peoples (UNDRIP), and others. In addition to passing international laws, across the world, community members, community leaders, advocates and activists, scholars, and others have initiated countless efforts to reverse such trends. Very broadly, their various efforts often include: creating the conditions for sovereignty, control, and governance authority to again be held by the local and indigenous peoples for lands they have traditionally stewarded for generations, by: a) passing laws that strengthen indigenous and local peoples' land rights and decision-making authority; and b) establishing indigenous management of conservation areas and sacred natural sites (or co-management with relevant state agencies); strengthening the human leadership and governance institutions responsible for the care and stewardship of sacred natural sites; revitalizing traditional rules that functioned successfully to protect sacred natural sites and conserve ecosystem biodiversity, as well as making new natural resource governance rules that blend traditional knowledge with emerging science; and strengthening indigenous and local cultures, reviving indigenous languages, and creating opportunities for intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge, beliefs and practices, among many other kinds of efforts.

III. Methodology

Methodology. I used a case study methodology as my research strategy. A case study methodology concentrates on description of processes, people, groups, organizations, cultures and governments (Woodside and Wilson, 2003); it is organized research on an event or a set of related events in order to explain and define a specific phenomenon (Zucker, 2001; Toloie-Eshlaghy et al., 2006). In the deep analysis of a case study, the researcher is freed from strict and inflexible approaches and rules to create more theories (Patton and Opelbam, 2003).

Sampling. From March until August 2020, I interviewed 35 academics, civil society activists and advocates, funders, and community leaders actively working to support community efforts to protect and conserve sacred sites and local ecosystems and/or to remember and revive traditional ecological knowledge, ceremony and ritual. Each interview lasted for roughly 2 hours. Most informants were interviewed twice; I spoke with some of them three times. Informants were selected using a "snowball sampling" or "referral sampling" strategy. In this methodology, study subjects recruit additional subjects from among their networks and social or professional circles. As the sample increases in size, data sufficient for empirical analysis is gathered. Although this methodology is subject to various biases, respondent-driven sampling has been shown, under certain conditions, to allow researchers to make unbiased estimates (Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004).

Respondent selection criteria. I began by interviewing individuals working in the fields of sacred natural sites, indigenous rights, and community-based conservation with whom I have personal relationships. Some of their thoughts, ideas and opinions are presented herein, where relevant. Many of these individuals are "hubs" of networks who have personally supported dozens of projects designed to strengthen and promote indigenous/community culture and/or conservation of sacred natural sites. Among the people interviewed for the case studies, the majority were referred by Ken Wilson, the previous Executive Director of the Christensen Fund, Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, the previous Executive Director of the Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) Consortium, as well as by Fiona Winton, Director of Sacred Lands and Waters for the Gaia Foundation. The referred case study respondents were selected on the basis of how directly and personally they have been involved in on-the-ground efforts to strengthen or revive their cultures and protect sacred natural sites.

Semi-structured interviews. Respondents were asked a series of questions designed to illicit details about their efforts to protect and conserve sacred sites and local ecosystems, and to remember and revive traditional ecological knowledge, ceremony and ritual. Emphasis was placed on gathering empirical data concerning respondents' eyewitness accounts and personal experiences of particular efforts and interventions in specific situations. Respondents were asked to send written project documentation, photos, and other supplementary materials. The first interview with each respondent closely followed the semi-structured questionnaire; subsequent interviews were more free-flowing, targeted to address gaps in the information provided during the first interview or to delve more deeply into subjects touched upon briefly. (See Appendix A). Each interview was transcribed, cleaned, and sent back to each respondent for verification and their own use. I was expressly clear – both when requesting the interviews and when returning the transcriptions – that the interviews were the respondents' intellectual property (rather than mine) and thus: 1) they were free to use the transcription for their own purposes, including on their websites, or in blogs, annual reports, or grant applications; and 2) I would send them a draft of my Masters dissertation, give them an opportunity to make changes, and request their written approval before putting their story in the public domain.

Data/project selection criteria. The search for appropriate respondents and relevant case studies was surprisingly narrow. Ultimately, I was able to find ten individuals and/or organizations across the world actively working towards the safeguarding and revival of traditional knowledge, rituals and ceremonies related to the protection and conservation of sacred natural sites. I restricted my research to projects that were specifically designed to revive or strengthen local cultures, beliefs and knowledge, with particular emphasis on: 1) community management and maintenance of sacred natural sites, sacred species, and other sacred commons; and 2) spirituality- and belief-based efforts to strengthen community conservation and promote local biodiversity flourishing. "Sacred natural sites" was defined broadly, so as to include cultures who believe that all land is sacred, who revere the soil itself, or who believe that all living and non-living

entities are aspects or manifestations of the divine. I particularly sought out efforts that began at least five to ten years ago, so as to be able to investigate their mid- and long-term impacts. All examples were contextualized with additional background research as necessary; the work of every organization profiled in the case studies had been extensively documented in various forms. A few organizations sent me internal documents, grant applications, and other supplemental materials that also informed the data.

Notably, although I used various channels to connect with Indigenous Peoples from both settler colonies and non-settler colonies, my efforts to interview Native Americans, Canadian First Nations, and Australian Aboriginal Peoples were unsuccessful. In particular, although I reached members of the Haudenosaunee, Haida, and Tlingit Nations directly, their disinterest became clear when multiple e-mails went unanswered. As a result, the case studies are solely from non-settler colonies, although the Venda case study from South Africa may be considered an exception, as well as those individuals interviewed who live within present-day Russia. Of the ten original case studies extensively researched, only nine have been included herein, as one lacked sufficient detail and the individuals interviewed were unable to speak with me further.

Data Analysis: The nine case studies of community-based efforts to strengthen and revive local cultures, beliefs, rules and practices concerning sacred sites and local natural resources were analysed as a group to make comparisons both within and across strategies. The interviews were post-coded to identify various themes according to the following labels: kind of sacred natural sites; underlying spiritual framework; western education-related threats; organized religion-related threats; colonialism or imperialism-related threats; free market capitalism-related threats; environmental impacts of threats; cultural impacts of threats; emotional impacts of threats, particularly shame and fear; spiritual impacts of threats; efforts to seek tenure security; creation of parks and conservation areas; efforts related to land governance; efforts related to codification of customary rules; efforts related to farming, food security, and livelihood preservation; efforts related to culture, including songs, stories, music, and art; efforts to remember rituals; enactment of rituals and ceremonies; efforts to ensure intergenerational transfer of knowledge; efforts to revive rites of passage; efforts related to language preservation; the process of dismantling internalized oppression; policy advocacy; corporate defeat; environmental and biodiversity impacts; women's empowerment impacts; food sovereignty and food security impacts; cultural revitalization impacts; supernatural actions; faith and trust; communication with non-human beings; and others.

Two tables set out various analytical frameworks. The first table summarizes the threats faced, the impacts of these threats on culture, biodiversity, and sacred natural sites, and the countervailing efforts made to remember, revive or strengthen the cosmologies and practices that function to protect sacred natural sites. The second table then identifies six overarching strategies used in most of the case studies, enabling a cross-case comparison of the various strategies and how those strategies relate to and impact upon one another. The analysis compared how each strategy was employed by the different implementing groups, taking into consideration the constraints identified and the challenges that arose over the course of each initiative. I used a basic qualitative content analysis (Bernard 2011) to determine common and variant themes in the interviews and case studies to answer the research questions.

Importantly, I took a critical realist approach to the data analysis (Bhaskar, 1998). One of the key tenets of critical realism is that ontology is not equivalent to epistemology; in other words: the nature of reality is not reducible to how we perceive and understand that reality. Within a critical realist framework, unobservable structures cause observable events, and there is some degree of realty that exists *outside* of our human perception: we can observe only *some* aspects of the reality we live within and experience. This conceptual framework allowed for all of the phenomena reported by respondents to be conceived of as factual, including actions taken by supernatural and unseen forces such as ancestors, spirits, and deities.

Limitations of the research. Unfortunately, this study was undertaken entirely within the time frame of the Covid 19 pandemic. As such, travel to the study sites was not feasible, and all interviews with key informants took place virtually, over WhatsApp or Zoom. My research was further limited by my language skills; all but one of the interviews were conducted in the English language. A further significant limitation to the validity of this research was that I was only able to speak with one informant for six of the nine case studies.

IV. Case studies

Because the following nine case studies were collected using a "snowball methodology," finding them was like going on a treasure hunt, or following a path of breadcrumbs strewn throughout a dark forest. Each conversation felt like a gift, or a teaching. The interviews, which spanned many hours, were authentic, emotional, and often very vulnerable. Almost every one of the respondents works or worked at an NGO, most are or were Executive Directors; I knew some of them peripherally through my work as a community land rights lawyer. As "development professionals" we are not used to speaking frankly and openly about deities, spirits, ancestors, and other non-rational phenomena. For many of the people I spoke with, my questions were a surprise, the ensuing conversation equally unexpected.[26] More than a few of the respondents affirmatively asked if we could speak again to continue the conversation.

The stories that follow showcase various communities' efforts to protect sacred natural sites or remember, revive and strengthen endangered or eroding indigenous cultures and cosmologies. As a group, the case studies are emotionally affecting; read from start to finish, you begin to feel the weight of the colonially- or imperially-imposed grief, shame, trauma and fear that are in the background of these narratives, as well as the bravery, determination, leaps of faith and trust that drive each story forward. The case studies illustrate - in very human terms - what it means to dismantle internalized oppression, and what defiant strategies to assert sovereignty over one's own ancestral territories look like. Most importantly, they illustrate the power available when humans learn to listen to and align their efforts with their ancestors' wisdom, and open their efforts to be influenced by the more-than-human world. Because of the very personal nature of these narratives, I have elected to keep as much of the stories as possible in the respondents' own voice. My role in the presentation of these stories has been mainly to curate and organize the experiences shared into coherent narratives that elucidate a chronological course of events and the various resulting transformations.

The nine case studies are presented in the following order. First, the story of the Tao People in Taiwan is presented as an example of what a culture currently in a process of rapid erosion feels like, through the lens of an elder who has dedicated his life to preserving that culture. The rest of the stories "take place" once people from ensuing generations step forward to revive what is or has been, for the moment, "lost." We begin in Colombia, where, forty years ago indigenous groups in the Colombian Amazon began working to protect their lands, sacred sites, and way of life, eventually claiming title to 20 million hectares, now fully managed in alignment with indigenous cosmology and protocols. We then move to South Africa, Kenya and Uganda for three stories of courageous advocates leading efforts to recover communities' ancestral seeds, stories, arts, and ways of life, and to remember and enact long-suppressed rituals for honouring lands and sacred sites. We then hear the story of how a Ghanaian community's elders and ancestors successfully stopped gold mining that would have desecrated their sacred lands. In Central Asia, we learn how a number of interconnected visionaries revived traditional fire ceremonies and created national parks to protect their sacred sites. We then move to Myanmar and Peru, where activists have supported communities to self-declare their lands as "parks" as a way of protecting their sacred sites, strengthening their tenure security, claiming sovereign control over their lands, and carving out the freedom to manage their land according to traditional principles. Together, the case studies illustrate how groups of brave, determined individuals can reconnect to the spirits, ancestors and deities their grandparents honoured; remember how to listen to, care for and conserve the natural world they live within; and take action to claim greater sovereignty over their lands, identity, and futures.

Each case study is presented in the following manner: first, I provide a very brief paragraph or two of historical, socio-political, and/or cultural background to establish some degree of contextualization for the ensuing narrative. The story of "what happened," as told by the respondent, is then relayed in full, with a heavy reliance on their account of how events unfolded. I occasionally intrude upon the story to provide some contextual analysis or to provide a summary of ideas described in respondents' narratives. Most of the case studies conclude with a bit of over-arching analysis; those that don't include this analysis end on such a beautiful note that any effort to neatly summarize felt stale and forced.

[26] See Appendix A.

A. "We Resist to Exist:" The Tao of Orchid Island

1. Context

The Tao People are a population of roughly 5,000 people divided into six tribal communities, around 3,100 of whom live on Orchid Island, their ancestral homeland, which they know as *Pongso no Tao*, or "Island of the People." Orchid Island is a mountainous, 45 square kilometre volcanic island forty miles off the coast of Taiwan. Tao society is non-hierarchical and egalitarian; they have no chiefs or ruling elders: instead, functional leaders take on specific responsibilities related to production, construction, and ceremonial activities. While a significant percentage of the Tao People's income currently comes from the tourism industry, the Tao originally made their livelihoods from fishing, augmented with wetland and shifting dryland farming of taro, yam, sweet potato and millet. Because of the richness and depth of their distinctive culture, beginning in the 19th century, the Tao People were exhaustively studied by anthropologists, who called them the "Yami people."[27]

This case study is placed first, as it is gives a snapshot of the moment *before* a courageous individual or group of individuals is motivated to energetically revive a deeply eroded culture. While the Tao people have continued to perform and fulfil their ancestral rituals and ceremonies, year in and year out, and do not have to recover these land-, sea-, and eco-system honouring ceremonies, as they are very much still alive and practiced, their culture is endangered. Due to the pervasive influences of Chinese colonialism, the modern capitalist market system, western education, conversion to mainstream religions, loss of native language speakers, and a host of other forces, the cosmology and sentiment *behind* the ceremonies has significantly weakened; the basic elements of the ceremonies remain, but the original richness and complexity contained within the original rituals is further lost with every passing year. The Tao's process is therefore not a process of remembering and recovery, but of *capturing* and *recording* before the elders who hold the language and deeper meanings pass away, and with them, the full depth of the Tao's knowledge, cosmology, and biodiversity-honouring management systems.

2. Ceremonies and Calendars that Honour the Tao's Embeddedness and Connectedness

For the Tao, every aspect and element of their ecosystem is sacred. According to Sutej Hugu, a Tao elder and the former Executive Director of the Tao Cultural Foundation:

> All land is sacred: we have no "sacred sites." For us, we would say that our tribal ethics or norms are situational and seasonal. Ceremonies are about cycles of time, about seasons. Every place - every inch of the island - has its norms and taboos under our tribal ethic. So of course the beach where we put on our boats – we consider it sacred when we are starting our fishing season. For us it is not "this mountain, this lake" but the whole place. For us, every inch of the island and all our surroundings have some kind of spiritual meaning or value. But we are also living on it, and it has its taboos and norms. But we cannot say: "This is where we worship."

The Tao have a unique eco-calendar called *'Ahehep no Tao'* (Evening of Tao people) that sets out how to follow sacred cycles of time and live according to both the monthly lunar cycle *and* the annual solar cycle; these cycles determine the beginning and end of various fishing, planting, and harvesting seasons. Within this calendar, the Tao organize their annual calendar by – and hold major ceremonies to celebrate – the thirteen moons and three particular seasons: *Rayon*, the migratory fish season (from March to June), *Teyteyka*, the planting and harvesting season (July to October), and *Amian*, the coral reef fishing season (November to February).

For example, to initiate the four-month *Rayon* season of the migratory flying fish, Tao fishermen gather on their tribal groups' respective community beaches for a ritual of summoning the flying fish back to

[27] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yami_people, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/9548567.pdf

the waters surrounding their island. In Tao cosmology, a regal ancestor of the black-winged flying fish taught the ancestors of Tao people how to catch the flying fish in a manner that successfully ensures the survival and thriving of both species; this ritual, *Mivanoa, is for "*reconfirming the inter-species compact between the flying fishes and Tao people from the ancient times."[28] During the ceremony, the men congregate by clan around their elaborately crafted fishing boats. One by one, clan elders take the occasion of the whole village being together to give their wisdom, share thoughtful observations, and remind people of important traditional rules. Their communities listen, chickens are sacrificed, and great celebratory meals are shared within the clans. Thereafter, the flying fishing season is "open" for people to fish in the vast waters beyond the coral reefs.

As the flying fish season concludes, the vegetable and tuber harvest season (*Teyteyka)* is inaugurated with the *Mivaci* celebration, in which all Tao men and women gather together to celebrate the harvest of more than fifty varieties of crops from both communal fields and family fields. When the harvest is complete, the Tao perform the M*ipazos* ceremony to open the winter season, *Amian*, of fishing among the coral reefs. For this ceremony, all Tao households must make sacrificial offerings, present them on the communal beach, then place them on the roof of each main house. This ceremony is done to restore harmony with the non-human world and reiterate the Tao Peoples' commitment to the well-being of all beings.[29]

At the heart of Tao culture is the sense of being "embedded and connected" within the ecosystem of Orchid Island and the surrounding ocean, and which dictates all of the Tao's interactions with the particular ecosystems and biodiversity on Orchid Island. Describing how this worldview that has shaped these cycles and ceremonies, Hugu said:

> In your life - actually every moment in the whole day of your whole life - you are connected and embedded. Because a tribal community is *embedded* in the ecological habitat. We have no words for habitat, but we know the cycles of nature and the rhythms of life and the connection of all beings. And we are embedded in such habitats, and in this embeddedness is the connectedness of all beings...This is our perception and a factor in all of our behaviour, because there are always taboos and norms. There are not clear rules, or customary law - of course we have rules, but they are more norms that define all our relationships; they are inter-species *compacts*. So we just follow the sacredness – everybody has an awareness of the spirituality in every place, in every time, not only in ceremony.
>
> On a small island, you are connected, you are embedded, you just know it, because your consciousness is facing it, you always face it. So you would always know what you should do or not do. That's not to say we never make a mistake or have an accident – always, we are human beings – but the whole society, the whole of our People, we are living in this kind of way….So if you are embedded and connected, if you are actually part of the cycle of nature, part of the rhythm of life, part of the network of beings…. A tribal community is not "collectivism;" your whole personality, your livelihood, and your life are built from the connectedness and the embeddedness [in the local ecosystem], not from being a member of a "group."

To ensure that the lush marine ecosystem that they depend upon remains biodiverse and thriving, the Tao have two central "types" of taboo, or "*makaniaw:*" seasonal taboos and daily taboos.[30] For example, during the season of the migratory flying fish, Tao fishermen are forbidden to fish in the coral reefs that surround the island, and must *only* fish in the open sea. Hugu explained the importance of this taboo:

> This is part of our inter-species compact with the flying fish, what the ancestor of the flying fish taught the Tao people. So we keep this taboo seriously… [It] is very important to keep our norm of embeddedness and connectedness…You can call it a taboo, but it is, for us, the aesthetic of life: you

[28] Hugu, Sutej, Seeking the Revival of Sustainability for the Island of the *Tao* People, 2012, unpublished.
[29] Id.
[30] Id.

organize your life in a beautiful way, with a bigger vision. So this is more like an etiquette. This etiquette is because of the connectedness, and it is full of knowledge, full of embeddedness. With very simple rules, it keeps us from doing what we should not do. So many people don't even understand the word "taboo," but it's a basic for Indigenous Peoples. Because it defines what we should not do…. So when I say that in the *"Rayon"* season, the migratory fishing season, we don't catch the coral reef fish, you can see that this is some kind of zoning - but it is a *multi-dimensional zoning system*.

The Tao's daily taboos are also designed to ensure against overfishing and depletion of any one species of fish. Hundreds of species of non-migratory fish live within the coral reefs surrounding Orchid Island, which the Tao divide into three categories. Roughly half the species are categorized as "inedible fish," *(jingngana*) which they do not eat, and throw back alive into the sea. Of the 180 species of fish they *do* eat, there are roughly 90 species of "good fish" *(oyod)*, which may be eaten only by Tao women and children, the rest are considered "bad fish" *(rahet)*, which may only be eaten by men. (Everyone may eat the migratory flying fish.) Because of these taboos, fishermen must return home with a wide variety of fish, to ensure that everyone in the household can eat. Hugu explained how:

> So you can see the pressure or overharvesting is gone, because you spread the fishing among many species…We use different wooded plates to keep this taboo – and these are seriously followed. The bad fish can never be put on the wood plate for good fish. We don't say what will happen if you do the wrong thing, but this is a seriously kept rule. They will even throw out the wooden plate if you put the wrong fish on the plate – it will contaminate it. You follow the rules, but it is beautiful…So maybe in the meta-interpretation it is good not only for the ecosystem, the habitats, and the species, but also for your nutrition!

The Tao also steward carefully-kept forests. To protect against overharvesting of the forests on Orchid Island, when a Tao child is born, his or her parents plant trees in the local rainforest that can then be harvested, decades later, by the child (now an adult) to use to build their family home and fishing boat. Most new-growth trees therefore "belong" to someone very specifically, while old growth trees are safeguarded and not felled for human use. Other kinds of planted trees belong to whole families and are inherited across generations, according to family emblems carved into their bark.

3. Rapid Erosion of Tao Culture

The Tao's embeddedness and connectedness within the cycles of their island and marine territories has been increasingly threatened by a gauntlet of outside forces, beginning with Japan's handover of Taiwan to China following the end of World War II. While the Japanese colonial government brought in only a small police force and some primary schooling, in the 1950's the Chinese government developed four labour camps, ten veteran farms, and a commanding headquarters. They enacted policies that undermined the Tao's collective land and marine tenure, and tore down the Tao's traditional wooden houses, constructing poorly-built cement homes to replace them. Then, in 1980, they sited a nuclear waste dump on Orchid Island, which soon led to high rates of cancer among island residents. Hugu explained the impacts of these events:

> The government initiated a so-called "program" to help the Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan. So they condemned all 556 of our old traditional houses – it was a cultural disaster. They tried to assimilate, or integrate us, "the savage people," into the modern world. They tore down our houses, which were not only houses, but a home of our culture: they demolish your house, and then everything you have valued is gone. Our ancestors tried to use every moment – in our house building, in boat building – to honour what is sacred. They tore down our houses and replaced them with new materials: concrete and a tin roof. The earthenware is gone, and in its place they have given us plastic, metal.
>
> …Then, they began dumping nuclear waste on our island in 1982, before the island even had

> electricity. A lot of nuclear waste was left on our island. In 2013 the health ministry leaked the news that our small island had the highest cancer death rate in all of Taiwan. We campaigned for 30 years and all we got was financial compensation. We get a lot of compensation: in 20 years, I think we have gotten over 100 million USD; every three years we get 7 million dollars. But they have not cleaned up the nuclear waste, because, they say, "There is nowhere to put it." They do not want it on their land, so they give us money. Then, just before the last election, they gave us 82 million dollars for retrospective compensation for all the years from 1980 to 2000. But this is not good for us, because money changes our values, and everyone is worrying about how to share the money, and the money divides us, and we lose the commons, we don't care about the community, everyone is thinking about how they will get their money…The money will destroy us. So now the people are starting to think in money, because now we have money.

In addition to the nuclear waste and the destruction of their traditional homes, two seemingly "beneficial" forces have led to an even greater undoing of Tao culture from *within*: western education and tourism. In 1970, the government made enrolment in formal western education until 8th grade mandatory for Tao children, effectively removing them from their families, within which they had been learning traditional Tao skills, language, knowledge and belief systems. Hugu described:

> It is step-by-step, generation-by-generation. When the old people are gone - they kept all the secrets, all the sacredness….[Formal education] was every day for 7 hours, during the time when you should be learning from your family in the wild and in the household. Then, in junior high school you are told: "You should go to high school and go to Taiwan, because junior high school is nothing. If you want a job, you need further education, you should leave your island." So everyone – 99% of a generation – moved to the cities after 1970...Very soon, you learn their system. You are forced to lose: they destroy what you have and replace it with their system, and they integrate you into their way, and turn your younger generation into another kind of people, so that even until now, our younger generation is not growing up in our Tao world view…. Even me, I went to work when I was 15 as an unskilled worker because everyone went 'out' at the time – because money was something interesting, and the outside world was interesting to explore. But since the 80's, our knowledge system and ethics have collapsed – because we have learned another way from living, being out in the world.

Then, starting from the early 2000's, tourism came to Orchid Island in force – fuelled by tourists seeking authentic "cultural experiences" with the Tao – specifically *because* of their ecosystem-based calendar of rituals, ceremonies, and traditional ways of living. The tourism business has dramatically transformed the island – bringing hotels, restaurants, adventure businesses, cultural performances, and a great deal of money. While in 2010 the island had only roughly thirty "hostels" (hotels, run by local families), in 2020 there are now more than 140 hostels. For the past few years, more than 150,000 tourists have arrived on Orchid Island (which has a population of only 5,000 people) in the six months from April until September, the same period as the migratory fishing season. As a result, the tourism industry is eroding traditional taboos designed to protect the fragile coral reefs that the islanders depend upon for food the rest of the year; Hugu explained how:

> This is our crisis. We have more than 150,000 tourists in just half the year, which overlaps with our migratory fishing season. In the migratory fishing season, there are many taboo norms…[so now] always there is conflict between the tourism industry and the community, or between the community and the hotel bosses, some of whom are even tribal community members - they are not from outside. So our taboo in the migratory season is that you cannot touch the coral reefs, so we don't do diving or angling (using a fish hook) for fish in the coral reefs. But when the tourists come, they say, "I want to go diving" and offer money. And "I want to go to fishing in the coral reef, and I want to rent your boat." Will you do it or not? Actually, most people do it. Their explanation is that they are outsiders, they do not need to follow our taboo norms. But this is the collapse of the [eco]system. So now the conflict is always there.

> And now the young people want to learn from the older people about ancestral boat building – because we are boat people… In our boats alone, we use seven or eight different species of tree. The first layer of our boats needs the best hardwood; we are not making dugout canoes, but boats like Vikings. Our boats have the same structure as the Viking boats… But they want to learn to make and use the boats for tourism – not for their own fishing, but to take tourists on these boats. At $10 USD for a short boat trip, it's easy money. Even when they come looking for knowledge now, they want it for capitalist reasons.

As a result of these forces, the Tao are struggling to keep even their ceremonies sacrosanct. Hugu described how:

> Just yesterday, two of the six tribal communities [on our island] had their ceremony to start the new season, the *finish* of the migratory fishing season. But they invited politicians, tourists, and put big money to do it like a big performance, so more and more this is not to keep the norms, the interspecies compact, our promise, our connectedness, our commitment to the connectedness and embeddedness. Now they are connected to money and embedded in the market, and this ceremony is a performance. It is more like performance because their livelihoods are already not connected and embedded.

4. Capturing and Cataloguing Tao Indigenous Knowledge for Future Generations

In the face of these challenges, the *Tao Cultural Foundation*, which was created to be a non-governmental platform for all Tao tribal groups to coordinate efforts to strengthen Tao culture, the *Indigenous Taiwan Self-Determination Alliance*, and Tao elders from all six tribes on Orchid Island have been working diligently to protect and preserve their culture. To date, they have launched three main projects designed to build an archive of their stories, songs, and verbal traditions; protect their lands and manage them according to customary rules and norms; and capture their indigenous ecological knowledge.

First, the Tao Foundation, in dialogue and collaboration with elders, created the *Tao Digital Archive*: a single repository of all anthropological research ever conducted concerning the Tao people and the Tao way of life. To date, they believe that they have located and collected roughly half of the academic studies and scientific surveys available from 1896 until today, including books, articles, photos, and films in Japanese, English, Chinese, and French. The initiative has turned the power dynamics of traditional anthropology on its head: instead of research subjects, the Tao are claiming these records as their intellectual property, transforming over a century of extractive academic research into a trove of data that they can use to educate themselves and future generations about the wealth of their cosmology, traditions, music, songs, stories, livelihoods, and ways of living. Describing these efforts, Hugu said:

> What we have achieved here is very humble. What we do is to recollect and restore our knowledge system….to collect the Tao knowledge base. We have collected all publications about us by outsiders – and all the audio-video recordings by them – from the 2nd World War onwards. This has been done by collecting outsiders' research on every aspect of this island from both the social sciences and the natural sciences. We have collected 2,000 hours of recordings: about 1,000 hours of story telling and some recordings of our ceremonial chanting. It still has to be fully transliterated, translated and interpreted for our future generations. Then there are the recordings of our elders, and the people who have already passed away. These were collected by the Japanese anthropologists years ago….Because of course, after 100 years of colonial government, there are coming so many academics and researchers to extract, record. But trust me, even if you use *all* these outside research documents, articles, and books, you cannot restore or build a Tao culture or knowledge system. Because this is a *living* tradition.

Second, to better protect and conserve the ecosystem of Orchid Island and the surrounding marine areas, they created the *Pongso no Tao Tribal GIS Database*. This database was made by interviewing elders and

recording more than 1,200 place names for important places across the land and waters. They are now in the process of restoring these place names on surveys and maps of Orchid Island. As part of this effort, they aim to establish a Tao land registry, as well as a land and natural resource management system designed according to Tao customary rules, taboos, and cosmologies. This project is also a re-claiming of power by colonized peoples: the power to name and manage their lands according to Tao traditions, language, beliefs and norms.

Third, they created the *Tao People Ethnobiology Knowledge Base*. This database catalogues the more than 900 Tao People's names for wild animals, birds, plants and marine creatures living within the various Orchid Island ecosystems and surrounding marine areas. Included with each plant and animal name are the Tao's traditional knowledge about each being's habitat, characteristics, behaviour, use, and all related norms and rules concerning human interactions with the species. Also included in the database are the Tao Peoples' more than twelve names for various kinds of winds (used for navigating orientation) and the names of certain stars. In addition, Tao cosmology sets out that "Beyond the material world that has been given names, there are other important categories of beings as 'given no names,' 'forbidden to be mentioned,' 'unspeakable,' and 'inconceivable.'"[31] The Tao people involved in this effort hope that this catalogue of their biocultural knowledge will help future generations manage the island's biodiversity.

To help preserve Tao knowledge and culture, the Tao Foundation established a *Tribal Heritage Keepers Group* for elders from each family lineage among the Tao's six tribes. To complement this work by elders, they also set up capacity-building and empowerment programs for women and youth, through the *Tao Youth Action Alliance* and the *Tao Women's Association*. Describing the Tribal Heritage Keepers Group, Hugu said:

> The Tribal Community Heritage Keepers group is a group of elders who still partially keep the traditional living knowledge, parts of it. Maybe they know storytelling, or weaving, woodcarving, fishing, boatbuilding, or knowledge of the forests, knowledge of the sea, knowledge about our eco-calendar…The Heritage Keepers are always there – generation to generation in families – they are always there, guiding the next generation, but there is not anything like an elders council. We have a fishing group, a farming group, and sometimes a house building group, led and guided by an elder…It is important for someone who is still knowing it and using it, applying it, to teach it. So when [the Tribal Heritage Keepers Group] are doing it, there is more knowledge in their memory, although maybe not in their daily application, as you can see the culture and traditions are collapsing. But we try to keep it, and now I think in the whole of Taiwan the Tao people are the best ones to keep our cultural knowledge base….
>
> You can see that an old man born in 1930 is already 90 years old; 1930 was before the 2nd World War. Back then, you did everything: you did fishing, going to the forest, you could organize your marriage and your family. People born after the 2nd World War grew up in a place that was already starting to be impacted from outside; and even these people born after 2nd World War are already 70…You can see that not many elders are there. And who is there does not really have the full set of the knowledge.

Starting in the late 1990's, the Tao Cultural Foundation worked incessantly to record elders telling traditional Tao stories before they passed away. They managed to get over fifty hours of recorded storytelling, which they have added to their databases. Discussing this, Hugu explained, "It is very important heritage, and already the old men do not tell stories to their grandchildren in their family because the children cannot understand their own language. People under 30 already are not good in their own language; they are not mother tongue children."

The Tao Foundation has also developed a textbook to teach Tao, but, Hugu laments: "mother tongue is

[31] Hugu, Sutej, Seeking the Revival of Sustainability for the Island of the *Tao* People, 2012, unpublished.

not learned from textbooks. The language becomes extinct first, then the culture changes, then the *people* are gone." To address this, Tao elders have been working with young Tao families, promoting speaking Tao within their homes. Hugu described:

> We have a class for teaching storytelling and song-singing and chanting for the younger generations…. We have almost lost our mother tongue. We understood [that if we didn't take action], our language would be gone in 50 years. Now our first foreign language is Mandarin, our second foreign language is English, and the third language our kids learn is the Tao language. It is given the least time in class every week in school. Last year they passed an indigenous language law, and the government promised to give us a budget to teach our indigenous languages to our children. But you cannot revive a mother tongue with a project or a budget….Some young families in our community have agreed to try to do their best to speak their mother tongue in their homes – but if they are not good at it, it is difficult, and also you are surrounded by the dominant cultural environment: by people speaking Mandarin, English, and Japanese.

As part of efforts to ensure the intergenerational transfer of their indigenous knowledge and their cosmology of connectedness with the entire natural world, Hugu convenes a group of Tao youth to have discussions about tradition, while the Tao Cultural Foundation offers classes for Tao youth. The Tao also use their ancestral ceremonies as opportunities to share Tao cosmology, culture, and language with younger generations. Hugu explained how:

> We have ceremony because we want to reconfirm again and again our teachings to our younger generations…Every time we go back to our traditional ceremonies, we can give them rich meaning within the current situation. The youth think: "This is an old thing, why do you still do it?" But then we can tell them. We never asked "why" when I was a child, but now they ask, and we tell them. We find ways to link our ceremonies to their own personal and modern situations.

5. Impacts

Despite the massive efforts undertaken to safeguard and revive their culture, the Tao way of life is being eroded by dynamic forces of modernity that are very difficult for a small island nation of a few thousand people to fight against. The databases and libraries that they are working so hard to build are therefore like seeds that future generations might plant when they are ready to revive and remember the full depth of their ancestral traditions and ways of relating to the lands, waters, and species they hold sacred. Hugu's thoughts on his people's efforts to protect and safeguard their island, their cosmology, their way of life, and their culture are both defiant and resigned:

> We resist to exist. This is the destiny of Indigenous Peoples in the modern system. I am strong, but we are being conquered, defeated, every time. But I am connected, I am embedded, and so I'm strong. Even if you destroy the planet, we are just living, we are not warriors *against* something; we are trying to keep the living tradition, and this is so difficult now…And now the small islands are in a critical crisis: how can the people still keep their awareness of the connectedness and embeddedness, still doing the rituals and ceremonies, not like some performance for the tourists?…Once people lose their connectedness and embeddedness, they become the marginal and the vulnerable minority in the modern world, and this is the real tragedy, and will need many generations [to heal].

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Today the Tao are indeed "in a very tough moment." Hugu explained:

> So the situation is post-colonial, postmodern, post-traditional: you lose your tradition, and your tradition is collapsing to almost gone. The island is now in a very critical crisis. We have been

> collapsing: for the first 50 years at a very slow speed, then in the next 10 years, more fast, and then the last 5 years, even more fast. And from this place of collapse, the 82 million [dollars] is another bomb to make us collapse further… How can we keep alive the living knowledge system in our invaded ecological habitats? Everything in our cosmology is from the cycles of natures: ecological cycles and systems, lunar and solar cycles – and we have a deep knowledge of it. And we follow the ethics of the land and sea to keep our connectedness, our relational ontology with the environment. But we are under siege – multiple sieges: from the state, from the educational system, from the market, and from tourism… Every way goes against our way. So maybe we are the last generation. So this is sad. We are not pessimistic, but this is tough.

However, as the following case studies show, it is more than possible to revive a culture and cosmology that seems to be rapidly eroding. Indeed, many of the following communities had even less remaining openly practiced culture to base their efforts upon than the Tao do currently. And, as a result of the elders' diligent work, future Tao generations now have an extensive database of recorded, catalogued information to delightedly explore in their hunger to revive the "old ways." Indeed, Hugu alluded to some of this emerging interest: young men are still asking their elders to teach them how to build traditional Tao boats; even if their interest is in tourism, once learned, the boat-building knowledge will continue into the next generation. And, as the foregoing case studies illustrate, again and again: even unrecorded knowledge is never lost, as ancestors find ways to bring it forward through dreams and other modes of transmission.

B. Living the Origin Stories: The Macuna, Barasano, Eduria, Tatuyo , Tuyuca, Guarana, Tanimuka, Ash, Yukuna, and Letuama of the Colombian Amazon

1. Context

Before the Spanish conquest of the land that is now Colombia, a flourishing and diverse population of nearly two million Indigenous Peoples, belonging to several hundred tribes, lived in relative abundance. During the colonial period, Roman Catholic missions were given jurisdiction to govern and "educate" these Peoples; for centuries the missions worked diligently to erode indigenous cosmologies, beliefs, language and identity, while the colonial enterprise seized their lands. Then, during the post-colonial rubber boom, which lasted from roughly the 1880's until the 1950's, rubber barons further devastated the indigenous population in the Colombian Amazon, making their wealth from the enslavement, forced labour and displacement of thousands of Indigenous People.[32] Then, starting in the 1960's, the Colombian people endured a more than fifty-year conflict, coupled with violence perpetuated by militarized drug cartels.

Despite these challenges, recent decades of organizing and advocacy have led to a number of different indigenous groups in the Colombian Amazon successfully securing title to their lands, protecting their sacred sites, and reviving their cultures by taking back control of their governance and school systems and creatively promoting the intergenerational sharing of indigenous knowledge. This case study tells the story of how forty years of hard work and consistent effort has engendered a dramatic revival of sovereignty, pride and dignity transpired among the Macuna, Barasano, Eduria, Tatuyo, Tuyuca, Guarana, Tanimuka, Ash, Yukuna, and Letuama Peoples.[33] Out of this work came significant learnings, which have been shared with a wide range of other Indigenous Peoples around the world. [34]

2. Securing indigenous title to 20 million hectares of rain forest

Martín von Hildebrand's family fled Germany during World War II and eventually settled in Bogota, where his father, who had been active in both the German and French Resistance, helped to establish a university. As a PhD student in anthropology in the 1970's, von Hildebrand lived with the *Tanimuka* and *Letuama* Peoples in the Colombian Amazon. He described his first weeks and months in this way:

> When I first came down through the rivers rowing, I stayed with this one community, and with pure ingenuity, I asked in a naïve way, "What is shamanism? What is witchcraft?" And I asked one of these fellows, and he just looked at me and said, "That's the way the elders think and heal the world." I guess it was the wrong question, or you can't just walk up and ask someone that.
>
> I spent many, many hours and days and more sitting on a low bench with them. They were all speaking their language and I could not understand a word. I was simply learning, and never getting to rest until they said "We will rest."…When I started, they said, "Why did you come here?" And I said, "I want to listen to stories."… [So] they started telling me stories, and the stories went until two or three in the morning, and [one day] they said, "It is your turn," so I decided to tell them a *long* story – the story of the Trojan War – with all the different gods and how they interfered in the world, and I focused on the gods, to show them that before we were Christians, we had many gods, like they have many gods. When I finished, they said, "Hmm, yes, Martín, that is shamanism, that's the way it works." And I wondered "What the hell are they talking about?" And they said, "You see, when you are healing the world, and dealing with nature,

[32] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon_rubber_boom, https://www.sapiens.org/culture/rubber-era-myths/

[33] Because of the large number of different indigenous Peoples in this case study, they will be referred to collectively in most instances, as "the communities" or the "indigenous Peoples."

[34] Many of the strategies and tools that the supporting NGO, *Gaia Amazonas,* innovated have been shared with a number of other groups in this study, including the Venda, Tharaka and Bagungu, who have adapted them to suit their context.

> we have myths of origin, and stories of origin, which we have been telling you – and each detail, each word, each name carries energy – and you take that energy toward the thing you are starting to heal – you go to the origin of the energy and pick up the energy as you meditate and start using it to heal – getting the body to restore its energy and restore itself." They do not use plants, they just do it through meditation. And that, my first trip, suddenly opened the door.[35]

As von Hildebrand was slowly allowed into their trust, he began to understand the challenges and pressures they were facing:

> I loved stories, so I got many of the myths they had, because origins are *not* in the past, they are in the depths of your soul. That is where origin is, not in the past; our origins are the depths of what we are living *now*, in us, and in nature, and how you connect with the same energy that flows through nature. And that allows you to become closer and intimate with nature, through your meditation. So as we went along with these stories, and they started telling me about their children being taken to missionary schools and being taught to not be Indian, told their food and their culture and language were wrong, and if they spoke their language they were beaten, and there was quite a lot of sexual abuse – it was very bad.

In addition to the abuses suffered in the Catholic boarding school, when von Hildebrand arrived the communities were still being subjugated by the rubber industry; while they were no longer technically enslaved, they were being forced to work to pay back dubious "debts" that accrued mysteriously, or to work off the flagrantly high costs of cheap tools they purchased from the companies. Von Hildebrand described how:

> The rubber guys brought these western tools, and the Indians paid with rubber all their lives…[and] as a consequence, the Indigenous Peoples were like slaves…When I arrived, from the very beginning, I said, "I'm not bringing any answers, it is *your* answers that count, this isn't my problem, its *your* problem. I am here and I'm willing to support you, but you have to find the answers, so let's discuss."…I started with a little program of micro-projects…. and we ended up dealing with about 100 communities composed of three or four ethnic groups along three rivers…They had a feeling they wanted to recuperate their identity, dignity, and self-confidence, and were confused about whether or not to break away from the priests, because they were their conduit to the outside world, where they had access to metal hatchets, and knives, etcetera, which make life easier… I told them there were other ways of accessing metal tools, and [so we] set up little shops and put the prices, clearly marked, and people could exchange rubber for these things, and when we had enough, we could go down to the border and sell the rubber in Brazil. In this way we started breaking away from the rubber people.

Eventually, von Hildebrand realized that he was supporting the communities to achieve only a superficial level of empowerment. One evening, he sat with a friend who was a lawyer in Bogota, and they determined that the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon needed three things: 1) to own their land; 2) for national laws to support their sovereignty; and 3) strong, organized indigenous governments that could negotiate as equals with the Colombian government. Returning to the Amazon, von Hildebrand explained how he gathered the elders and:

> I spoke about land, and said "You must get a title for your land; a title is a piece of paper the

[35] As Von Hildebrand tells is, one origin story is as follows: "At the beginning, all these spirits were acting in the abstract world, not the material world, and they all thought they were *most* important… and then the female energy came in and invited them to collaborate, and they all wanted to be in charge, and it didn't work…They are the children of time, the ones who have always been – and they still exist – because they are the Guardian Spirits of Nature. They realized they were doing something wrong, and what they were doing wrong was that they were doing everything *simultaneously.* So they invented time, and they divided the world into seasons, and each one has moment to be, to express their energies fully without clashing. When you move from one season to the next, that's when they clash. So they invented rituals, so that when they move from one season to another, the shaman makes a ritual to mark the moment….The whole world is impregnated by that energy – and so you have a ritual to send that energy back to the spirits. The world we see is not the real world; the shaman can see that all animals and a human beings are the same, and the same as the plants. The shaman can see all that. The shaman can see…the energy that flows through everything.

> government gives to you saying the land belongs to you." They said, "But the land does not belong to us, it belongs to the trees, the animals and the plants, and we are part of that. The land does not belong to us." We discussed this, and I told them that in time people will come to claim their lands unless they do it first. So the shaman went and meditated, and consulted the spirits. And the next day, they told me "The spirits said that the land belongs to the animals, and plants, and nature, not to us, but since Martín is white, and Martín says that white people think like that, Martin should go and get that paper."
>
> So I decided to go and get as much land as we could get….I decided to go for 20 million hectares. But anyway, the point is that the elders said, "Go and get it, the spirits say do it." And so then I was being sent by *them*, then. They put the energy into me, sending me, protecting me, putting forth that my work would be sweet and that people would listen to me. I can't say I was their messenger, but what I did then carried *their* energy, going through their healing, their quiet rituals. They put the energy so I could move along the right lines. I was not *at all* aware of that at the moment; it took *years* for me to understand that they were protecting me and guiding me along the way. But I went ahead.

Von Hildebrand was also helped in these efforts by his own personal connections: as a teenager, he had attended the French School in Bogota, with the children of the Colombian elite. He explained how:

> My father had come to start a university in Colombia, and so we were in at the top, a known family, European, and for those people, that opened a space for me….[Being in school with the elite] put me in touch with the sons of the important politicians. So I ended up with contacts. That was very important. So I could talk with these people and get them to support me as I pushed for these land rights.

Leveraging these connections, Von Hildebrand worked within the Colombian government for many years to get the Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon title to their lands. He described how:

> It was very difficult to get the general opinion of the government to get on board, but I told my story to two presidents. [The first President, Virgilio Barco Vargas] would invite me to his office to talk about the Indians, and about nature – because he had all kinds of other problems – and I was a relief…Everything having to do with Indigenous Peoples, he would ask me to handle it…As a result, I had the unconditional support of the President, so none of his ministers would question what I would say because they knew that the President would support me fully when it came to indigenous rights. And eventually the President said, "We have to protect the rainforest – to help stabilize the climate and the people who have taken care of the forest for thousands of years, and so we should recognize that the land belongs to them."

Between 1986 and 1990, the Colombian government recognized 200,000 square kilometres of rainforest in the Colombian Amazon as "Collective Indigenous Territory." During this time, Von Hildebrand was Head of Indigenous Affairs in Colombia, and an advisor to Vargas. In addition to securing title for the Guarana, Tanimuka, Ash, Yukuna, Letuama, Macuna, Barasano, Eduria, Tatuyo and Tuyuca tribes, among others, he helped to establish a Colombian "Special Commission on Indian Affairs," and a "Special Commission on the Environment." Von Hildebrand is quick to point out how unique the situation in Colombia was, and how much their efforts were inadvertently helped by the armed conflict with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (*FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional (*ELN), which was on-going from 1964, and which, in some estimates, led to the deaths of 220,000 Colombians and the mass displacement of more than five million civilians.[36] Von Hildebrand described how:

> We had the guerrillas and the drugs, which meant that people stayed out of the area for thirty years. We went and spoke to the guerrillas and we got them to agree to not go into the homes of

[36] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colombian_conflict

> the Indigenous Peoples, not go into their villages. They were a leftist movement, and they still had the ideology of a communist or a fairer world, not a hierarchical, colonial approach with the elite running the country. They would tell me: "What you have been doing, helping the Indigenous Peoples get their land and set up their own governments is what we want to do once we win the revolution! You are already into the next step! So we respect you and we respect the Indians, and so we will not bother you and create any difficulties. Just keep your mouth shut, and don't say where we are, and we won't bother you." They would go up and down the rivers where we were, but we kept our mouths shut. They kept the mining people out, and the Western companies out – so we could work. And since they came to a peace agreement, now outside pressures are coming. But we had 30 years to get going, when the only problems we had were the missionaries.

3. Strengthening and reviving culture, cosmology, and community rituals

Securing indigenous title to over 20 million hectares of land was an tremendous accomplishment, but it only served to protect the outer boundaries: within the communities, more than a century of colonial and Catholic oppression and the brutalities of the rubber barons had wreaked significant damage upon the groups' internal systems, cosmologies and sense of dignity. Von Hildebrand explained how:

> In Colombia, a lot of Indigenous Peoples lost their land and culture, and their language, and they were humiliated. A child was looked down upon if they were an "Indio." So the children made an effort to be like the whites, not to feel humiliated….[So when we started looking into what else was needed] others said, "We have been pushed around by rubber exploitation; we don't know our land, we need to go back to the land and learn – to see where the Guardian Spirits live, make our proper offerings, and go back to being part of the land, because we were pulled away from our land."

Von Hildebrand started by helping each community strengthen their decision-making authority, so that they could fully set up and run their own governments, as "Colombia has been basically logical – because they agreed that if you own something, you have the right to run it, to have at least a local government." Hildebrand explained how:

> We told them, "*You* decide what you want to work on, and *you* decide how you want to set up your life… We discussed: "What are your needs, what do you want?"… Some decided, "What we need to do is address education; we are losing our traditions with the Catholic priests." Others said, "We have to start with health." It was necessary to start with *something* to govern, to have a government.

By this time, Von Hildebrand had founded *Gaia Amazonas*,[37] an NGO whose mission is to "protect the Amazon hand-in-hand with the indigenous communities." *Gaia Amazonas* had a team of earnest, innovative staff who went to live with the communities for long periods of time. Silvia Gomez, now the Director of Colombia Greenpeace, was one of those young staff. She explained how, guided by the elders and in constant dialogue and co-creation with the community members, the *Gaia Amazonas* team slowly supported them to strengthen and revive their culture and cosmology:

> Once their territory was theirs, legally, then we needed recognition of the cultural and social knowledge that was *behind* the ownership of the land… Now the questions was: "How to part of the country? How to be as traditional and authentic as possible, but be part of a national dynamic?" So the idea of a continuous dialogue was always in our methodology… We had 3-4 months of living with them, asking questions. They used to laugh and say, "You are far from giving us solutions, we are tired of you asking questions! Why are you always wanting to know more? Why don't you give *us* solutions?" [But] we would never have come up with these methodologies on our own, without the elders. They were saying: "We are part of this crazy white world, and you will all depend on the forests in the future, so you need us, but we need you, because we don't

[37] https://www.gaiaamazonas.org/en/

> have a clue with how to do with all these government processes!... So how can we actually work together?" We asked about their….[annual cycles], what were their stories of origin…We showed that we were seriously interested in their way of being with the land, asking: "How do you keep your people healthy the whole year round? How come even in the most difficult situations, you always have food and drinking water? How are you always deeper into your spiritual path?"

Eventually, the Gaia Amazonas team worked with the elders and community members to create a series of "talking tools" - mapping exercises through which the communities could discuss and catalogue their indigenous knowledge, cosmology, and annual rituals. For example, one exercise, the "Ecological Calendar"[38] is a map of the year that shows the changes of season and the cycles of plants and animals, and includes all cyclical rituals and the times of specific deities/energies, stretching from beneath the ground and reaching all the way to the stars. Gomez explained the Eco-Cultural Calendar in this way:

> What we actually experienced in the Amazon forest with communities… [is] that the territory is more than valleys, mountains, and river basins: beyond that there are ancestral memories, ancestral knowledge, and historical ways of connecting and being one with the territory…One has to create or develop *methods of remembering* that access that information….[When drawing the eco-cultural calendars] we are connecting the territory and the way the territory shows/manifests with *time* - the connections between the stars, the sun, the constellations, nature and humans. Those changes and relationships are super important: not only the territory, but how we *interact with it* and read the territory as a whole, and understand the parts not in isolation, but the *relationship between the parts*. We can see that nature changes, and has different harvests and manifestations: dry seasons or rainy seasons, or you see how the flowers come up or when the seeds are in the ground.
>
> Reading those changes, humans can actually work with or act in co-relation with those manifestations ….We start from there. It's from the feeling of the land, the feeling of the drums: all the languages that are not tangible or material – all those voices that are there in the land and in the territory have a lot of information and can be *listened t*o….And that [listening] is how humans can know when to do their activities – harvesting, growing, clearing the crops – and also when rituals must be done. So rituals and ceremonies and these kinds of spiritual gatherings are also a very reciprocal way to boost nature to go its own way, and to let nature know that we are going to be *part* of nature, and eat or hunt what nature provides. And the relationships between all of those elements is what we have called the "Eco-Calendar."[39]

Such activities emerged from years of learning from the elders and innovating strategies to help them tell the origin stories of their sacred sites, the importance of each sacred site, and how the sites interconnect and relate to one another. Gomez explained how:

> We were always learning more from them than they were from us. The elders were always referring to their stories of origin; it was always crucial for them to come back to their origins. These stories have all the information that you need. How the world was created, and how the sacred sites relate to the ancestors and the forces of creation. Their origin was from the waters, who came from the Gods, who started going through the waters to give the knowledge for the

[38] Another exercise is the creation of "Eco-Cultural Maps," which are made in three phases: first, elders draw a "map of the past," or "ancestral map," portraying how the land, waters and territory were in the past, reflecting the ancestors' original order and way of living, as well as the layout of the community, sacred sites, and other key landmarks. They then draw a "map of the present," portraying how the territory is currently – the roads, airfields, churches, rubber plantations, etc. – as well as the sacred sites, and the current boundaries of the forest, etc. Finally, they draw a "map of the future," expressing their desires for how they would like to leave their territory for future generations. Gomez explained how this process leads to rich community discussions about changes over time, and creates a sense of possibility for empowered action: "Creating a map of the present is about understanding what has happened and how changes have drastically impacted and created the territory that is being lived now. Sometimes it is sad. But there are still some traces of the "map of the past" in the present map, which allow people to feel they can still have hope, "This is ours, we can believe that this can be changed." These maps start to create the feeling of the agency of the people: this is our territory, our land, our life, so how can we regain the power to be active participants in our lives?"

[39] Such information, eventually catalogued, written down, and made "legible" to outsiders, later helped the communities to protect their territories from mining (described further below).

people to live, giving the coca, the seeds, the instruments for music, all the trees to create the *Malocas*, which are the communal houses.[40] The anacondas were going through the rivers, giving the humans all the ancestral knowledge they needed to live on the land. When the anacondas stopped to give each piece of information, those places where they paused became sacred sites, the places of knowledge emergence, the places where special knowledge or guidance or stories, songs, music or healing guidance were given by the ancestors.

The process of telling these stories of origin and using them to make territorial maps and cosmological, seasonal calendars - which thereafter remained on display in public for all community members to study - helped to strengthen the communities' traditions and revive key rituals that, in some tribes, had not been performed in decades.

4. Keeping alive the rituals, and re-establishing spiritual links with the Spirit Guardians

When von Hildebrand and the Gaia Amazonas team first began working with the tribes, many of them reported having lost some degree of their traditions. Describing how they held on to their culture during the decades filled with violence, oppression and enslavement to the rubber barons, Gomez said:

> They [had] managed to keep performing some of the most important rituals, and that was the main way that they kept knowledge alive within the community. The rituals are like twenty people in one *Maloca*, a collective activity in which people feel the power of the land, not only listening to the stories but *living* the stories – and dancing the harvest and drinking the food. The Shamans were healing – three days of dancing and drinking a beverage made from a local fruit…
>
> Their way of thinking is very complex, very multidimensional, truly holistic and multi-layered. The past, present, and future are always *one,* and time and territory collapse into one, and what happened at the beginning is actually happening *now*…. So what is beautiful with these tribes is that *time collapses* in the sense that every time they perform or do a ritual today, they are going back and reviving the moment of origin; they are *re-living the first ritual* that the first ancestors and the first gods performed. So they are saying exactly the same words that the creators said, dancing and performing the same dances, taking the same hallucinogenic medicines like tobacco or coca, playing the same sacred flutes, speaking the same words as their ancestors and the Creators said at the moment of creation. …So through the rituals and ceremonies, they managed to keep that knowledge alive until they got into the process of reviving the knowledge.

There were differences among the various groups that Gaia Amazonas was working with during this time: some were far more "intact" – they had successfully maintained their languages, ceremonies and traditions – while others, relatively more devastated by Catholicism, colonialism, and the rubber trade, had lost key elements of their culture. As a result, efforts to strengthen their culture and revive their cosmologies and rituals varied widely, according to each community's degree of loss. Of particular interest is that one of the tribes had completely lost its own language, which was the only language they were permitted to use to speak to the Guardian Spirits of the forest. Von Hildebrand explained the intricate process through which they recovered their ability to speak with the Guardian Spirits:

> [When asked what they wanted to focus on, one tribe said,] "We have lost our language." And so we decided: let's talk about it. We looked around, and we found a group in Peru that speaks their language – so they sent people down to learn from members of that group. They didn't get their language back, but they got their songs and rituals back, and that allowed them to recover their *identity*. If you don't have your own identify, you lose your political power. Once they had their rituals and songs, they had recovered enough to be able to go to their neighbours and ask, "Will you lend us your language?" – which they already spoke, because they spoke two or three

[40] The *Malocas,* or communal houses, themselves represent the sacred places where humanity and all the beings were created: each post within a *Maloca* represents a sacred site, while the building as a whole represents the wider cosmovision of the territory.

> languages. The neighbours said, "Let's consult the Guardian Spirits," who gave their permission. So now these people could use [their neighbours'] language to speak with the Guardian Spirits… and to conduct all the rituals. So now they have settled back comfortably in a relationship with nature - because they went through a spiritual initiation to use a different language. But first they had to recover their identity enough to get the loan. Because if you don't have an identity, you can't even ask, because you don't have the basket to put the gift into. That took a decade.

Working with their Peruvian relations and neighbours, this group achieved a successful "work-around:" once they had earnestly and diligently gone the route they could then ask permission to use a language they already spoke – for communication but not ritual purposes – in ceremony and ritual. By being flexible and creative, and focusing on the actual end goal – not the language, but the communication with the Guardian Spirits – the community was able to restore its relationship with the sacred.

5. Ensuring the continuance of their culture: securing territorial sovereignty, reclaiming control over their children's education, and establishing systems for intergenerational learning

a. Securing territorial sovereignty

For the Guarana, Tanimuka, Ash, Yukuna, Letuama, Macuna, Barasano, Eduria, Tatuyo and Tuyuca tribes, regaining control over the governance and administration of their territory has been a key element in the process of strengthening their identity and re-establishing their sovereignty. In 2000, as part of this process, the various Peoples of the Colombian Amazon and the Colombian government set up a coordinating platform for institutional decision-making called the *Mesa Permanente de Coordinación Administrativa,* whose mandate was to support and shape the tribes' administration and management of their lands.[41] Von Hildebrand described the negotiation processes that took place under the aegis of this platform*:*

> The government was very scared: the government is very scared of sitting with those who they don't control, who speak a different language and have a different worldview. The Indians didn't come to ask for things or to be upset that they had been unjustly treated [in the past]; they came to talk about "What is health? What is learning?" "What do you Western people mean by "'education?'" That was the depth of their questions!… We would spend two weeks with them before any of these meetings, getting them properly prepared. They also had one very powerful tool, which was *silence*. They would say what they had to say, and then the Secretary of Health or Education would answer, and then there would be silence. And the western world cannot handle silence, they get nervous. And so they would say, "Have you understood?" Silence. Silence. And then eventually the Indians would say, "There is a word missing from what you have said. You didn't come to our specific point." And silence would force the government to speak. It was very powerful… And so the government was almost at a loss. The Indians were always setting the deeper agenda – and surprising the government by not asking for infrastructure.

As per the new Constitution of Colombia,[42] and as titleholders to their lands, the communities had the right to set up their own autonomous governments. They spent years doing so, claiming back control over the schools and their curricula, establishing health systems that integrate traditional medicine and western medicine, and negotiating for fully decentralized funding - that they controlled - to finance their governance and social services infrastructure.

[41] The *Mesa Permanente de Coordinación Administrativa was designed to* consolidate the governance of local and departmental governance and lay the practical foundations for the administrative and political organization of the territory. It was designed to be a platform for inter-administrative coordination and dialogue, through which the Indigenous Peoples and state officials could work in collaboration. https://www.foronacionalambiental.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/PolicyPaperFna-022.pdf

[42] Colombia's 1991 National Constitution established defined Territorial Entities (Entidades Territoriales) as departments, districts, municipalities and "indigenous territories." Within each Indigenous Territory, the Indigenous People of that area have the authority to self govern, manage the natural resources, and define and collect the taxes.

b. Supporting youth to embrace their culture

Alongside their national policy advocacy efforts, the communities were working with Gaia staff to address the widening rift between elders and youth in their communities. Describing the situation when she arrived, Gomez said:

> During this period of not performing the rituals there were new generations who never connected with the stories of origin – so they risked doing the things they were forbidden to do, fishing in the places they were forbidden to fish – and illnesses arrived, because [sacred sites] are potent places…There has been a history of a contradiction. The Catholic Church and the boarding schools were always promoting this other way of living: Spanish and technology and writing, and all these things gave you status; not being indigenous, or becoming more similar to the white people, gave you more status. But that was dangerous, because when the children would go back to their communities, they didn't really belong: they couldn't dance barefoot, they didn't eat what their community ate - so they were, in a way, refugees of their own culture. [They were also] feeling rejected by the elders who were saying, "We are losing these children" and rejecting all the western things; so [the youth] also felt that that "If the elders are rejecting this, I'll do it even more!" And since the leaders have such a strong position and their word is more important, the youth felt ignored, judged, and not included…[Meanwhile], the elders expressed to us that they felt lonely, feeling that the youth thought that their ancestral knowledge was backwards.

Von Hildebrand described how the elders brainstormed a solution to bridge this divide and pass their knowledge and culture on to the youth:

> The elders complained: "Our younger people are not listening to the stories, not coming to the rituals, not practicing, and we are losing our younger generation, and we are sitting in a corner, and people do not listen to us." So I asked, "What are you going to do about this?" and they said, "Let's turn them into anthropologists: if they can handle a computer and a tape recorder, let them study us and write it up in their language, and then they'll learn it. They will have to learn the songs - and they can write them, tape them, film them, and put them into the computer. What do you think?" And I said, "Okay let's try!" And they did. And there, the elders were in their element!… When they started talking to their youth about the traditions, telling them about the land, and the Spirit Guardians, how the seasons work, which are the sacred sites, why are they important, when you do the rituals: they really know, they are in their element.

Gaia Amazonas paid the young people a small stipend for their research, with the explicit intention of teaching the youth that they did not necessarily have to leave their communities to earn money - that being a social researcher within their own culture could be a recognized, respected job and source of income. The research project proved to be very successful, and immediately impacted the youth: they started to find a deeper sense of pride and dignity in their identify. Gomez explained how:

> The young people were thrilled by computers, recording machines – and the elders had the knowledge, the language, the stories, the songs…So we started to develop an endogenous, internal process of research… We created local research groups where the youth asked the elders about the stories of origin, why they were doing this ritual, why they couldn't fish in that place, etc. So they started to awaken the knowledge in the heads of the elders with their questions. And as they proceeded, all this knowledge became kind of "cool" for the young people, as the young people came to understand that the more you know, the more powerful you are and the more connected to the land you are, and that became a thing of pride: "I know my story, I know my origin, I am *Macuna*." And the elders felt important, too, because the youth were finally asking them what they know…So while we were strengthening the elders, we were creating a safe space for the youngsters to be aware and proud.

As the youth learned, the communities reported immediate tangible impacts on food security and children's nutrition. Von Hildebrand described how:

> A traditional way of dealing with the forest or bringing up a child is very sophisticated, and the elders know about that. But the younger women went and studied with the missionaries or in the schools, learning elements of imitation of the western world, and it takes time to get past that. But then, in the course of the women doing the research about the plants, animals, and all their peoples' history behind that - their gardens produced more!… [Putting] the young women with the elder women: it's not that you sit down and tape stories, it's that you go into the garden together, you look at the plants, you garden, and be with the elders in the garden, and you watch as the forest recuperates the garden space. You ask for a loan from the Pachamama, and from the Guardian Spirits, and if you do not do this properly, the ants invade. It's *how* you do it; it is very sophisticated…[After learning from their elders] the women were producing twice as much food because the elders were teaching them, and their children's health improved.

c. Changing the education system

As the years passed, and the youth became more and more knowledgeable about their culture and traditions, the elders were making political headway, finally gaining the right to control their children's education system. As such, it was only a short jump for the elders to ask and suggest: "Why are the main teachers in our schools people from abroad? Why don't we have our own teachers? These local researchers should be our teachers, so we have children who are seeing the benefits of staying here on the land, and not going out to live another life!" Today, these youth, now adults in their own right, are teachers in the schools, educating the children in alignment with their culture. Gomez described how:

> The forest will not be able to survive without indigenous and local knowledge - that was one of our main learnings and roles: to provide strategies and tools to train the teachers to write down the language, make the maps, design the materials for teaching, to create a different way of understanding "school:" children going out to the *chagas* where the crops are grown, going to the river – creating different pedagogical spaces to create a more grounded way of education...Today, the schools are run *only* by local teachers – and their educational programs are in their own language, and the second language is Spanish – and it used to be the other way around!

And, the recordings captured by those researchers are now cherished by today's youth, as many of the elders who shared their knowledge are now gone. Gomez recounted how:

> They do have in their schools places where they keep the recoding and the maps and the photos – they are still fascinated by the fact of being able to listen to the elders who are no longer there and that's something they are very grateful about – being able to listen to their voices even after the elder has passed away. Sometimes you arrive in the community and you see little kids listening to the story of origin that the elder once told, again and again.

6. Protecting their sacred sites: fighting off the mining companies and securing national park status on their own terms

Around the year 2000, the Colombian government began softening legal restrictions on extractives and opening up the country to international mining ventures. Between 2001 and 2103, the Colombian government sold the mining rights to more than 1.5 million hectares of land to foreign corporations.[43] When the government and the FARC signed a "General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and

[43] Large-scale mining in Colombia: Human rights violations past, present and future, U.S. Office on Colombia, 2013. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/large-scale-mining-full-report.pdf

the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace,"[44] in 2012, it further opened the door to mining companies who immediately began exploration throughout the Colombian Amazon. Although the Indigenous Peoples had title to their lands, the Colombian government holds all sub-soil rights.[45]

The Amazon communities' cosmology strongly prohibits mining subterranean minerals. Von Hildebrand explained how, in their cosmology:

> There was something else before humans, and [before humans arrived] the Guardian Mother Earth came and put order – she put things away from this world that were not good for this world. They were good for the previous world, but not for this one. And she hid them in the soil – like oil: they were not for us to dig out without her permission, [as] they do us harm, and cause disease."

In many instances, the places where the Guardian Mother hid these materials became sacred sites. So when the mining companies arrived, the communities were concerned that their entire system of honouring and keeping the order of the earth would be decimated. Von Hildebrand explained how:

> They have a system of sacred sites. They are all interrelated…[The sacred sites] are places where you have the origin: where the first ancestors were born or where the Guardian Spirits fixed problems with the world…It's a whole holistic approach: the sites, meditation, the cycles of the year, the seasons, the animals – they are all parts of something, components of an entire system. It may be a bit of mud, nothing – but it is a sacred site. It is energies, something complex, a complex system…The shaman keeps the energy flowing, keeps the order in the world, and the sacred sites are the special places where you can connect with the Guardian Spirits and where the energy is coming from. Animals can reproduce there. A shaman on his own [without the sacred sites] cannot heal.

Von Hildebrand related one example of how the mining companies' exploration directly threatened a sacred site, creating a sense of powerlessness and desperation among the elders and shamans:

> The *Apapuris* people have a place which is sacred for all the people of the area because it is the place where human beings appeared for the first time when they were created in this world. They came out from under the rivers and determined to be in this world. But these humans started disappearing because they did not know how to live in this world... So they asked [a Guardian Spirit] to *teach* them how to live in this word. All of the men in this area go [to the place where those teachings were given] and meditate, and come into contact with the Guardian Spirits. And this place is very sacred, and it's a place where there is *a lot* of gold. So, some years ago a Canadian company started to come in and get the gold. The shamans said, "We can't stop them. They have money, guns, power – we can't stop them." The shamans said, "We are losing against the company, and then more companies will come."

Eventually, after a great deal of legal analysis and discussion, the elders, shamans, and leaders agreed to seek to make their lands a national park, as, under Colombian law, mining and extractives are forbidden within national parks.[46] However, armed with the information about how national parks around the world have historically dispossessed and marginalized the Indigenous Peoples living within then, the tribes made a very unique request: they would run the park themselves, according to their cosmology, traditional knowledge, rules and protocols. Von Hildebrand related how:

> They [told the government]: "You are interested in biodiversity. *We* will run the park according to our indigenous knowledge, according to our cycles"…And the Parks Department people said, "Okay, we will give you give five years to write down your management plan on paper, because

[44] *Acuerdo General para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera*.
[45] The regulatory framework for mining activities in Colombia is set out in the Constitution and the current Mining Code (*Law 685 of 2001*); these laws set out that the Colombian state is the owner of all mineral resources in the soil and subsoil.
[46] Article 34 of the Mining Code (Law 685 of 2001).

we need a management plan that we can show – so you have to put it in writing."

This agreement was the first instance in Latin America that a government agreed to allow Indigenous Peoples to manage a national park according to their own indigenous practices. To draft the management plan, the elders chose not to do it themselves, but to place it in the hands of the young people as part and parcel of their research efforts. Von Hildebrand described how:

> The elders could have sat down among themselves and written it, dictated it – but they said, "No. We will get the young people to do all the research, and write it down – because if the young people don't know and understand, the rules will be nothing." So the young people did all the research…It took them five years, but they wrote it, and we managed to get it in a week before the last president left. The park is run according to their traditional knowledge – and the government has signed it. This is a big important thing, because it is a new paradigm: the government has accepted that you can handle the land based on another worldview, rather than the government's one… The government has accepted a way of taking care of nature, through a cosmology and a world vision that they don't really understand – not responding to science and technology – but to meditation and energy flow.

However, the process was not without its challenges, requiring the leaders' enormous resolve and strength to withstand the manipulations and pressures of the mining companies. Von Hildebrand told of how:

> In the middle of it all, the Canadian company came to [Rondon, a leader] and put on the table 20 million pesos, and said, "If you sign this paper we'll give you another 20 million." And Jaime Tanimuka was there translating, and he said, "I thought he would take the money, because I would have!" And Rondon sat there quietly and said, "Take your money and get out of here. If I sign that piece of paper and you affect the sacred sites, I will never sleep again. People will get sick and I will spend the nights healing people. Illness will come to the whole community." And they insisted, and he said, "I told you once, I'll have you thrown out if you don't get out now." It wasn't that he was particularly generous, or not ambitious; it was that he realized, he understood: "If I do this, it will be the end of me and of the people and that's it." Its not that he didn't want the money, or was being honest; it is a profound understanding and a worldview. He was being asked to go against the essence of the world - and it would have collapsed.

Finally, in 2015, President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, signed over parts of the Colombian Amazon to become a National Park, protecting the forest, the land, the waters and the tribes' sacred sites from mineral exploration for posterity. Critically, because the youth led the process of cataloguing their customary rules for natural resource and land management, they have a profound understanding of the reasoning behind each rule, and strictly respect them; von Hildebrand reports how, while in other places around the Amazon young people accept money from tourists to take them to sacred sites, "in this park, the youth will not take tourists to the sacred sites because they understand it will bring illness upon their community."

7. Impacts: A Revival of Dignity

Over the course of forty years of steady, determined effort, the Macuna, Barasano, Eduria, Tatuyo and Tuyuca, Guarana, Tanimuka, Ash, Yukuna, and Letuama Peoples, with the help of von Hildebrand and the Gaia Amazonas team, successfully sought and received title to 20 million hectares of their ancestral lands; fought off mining companies by making their territory a national park – run by them, on their own terms, according to their cosmology, indigenous knowledge, and customary natural resource management protocols; wrested administrative control over their territories from the central government, gaining the freedom and sovereignty to set up their own school systems, health services, and social services, run and organized in alignment with their culture; and devised an ingenious strategy that successfully ensured the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and reinvigorated the next

generations' interest and pride in their own indigenous culture.

As a result, young people are not leaving their communities to seek employment in as high a number as before, and children are learning indigenous knowledge in their own indigenous languages at school. Sacred sites are protected, and shamans are once again leading their communities in elaborate seasonal rituals that help maintain the order of the cosmos and the thriving biodiversity of the Amazon.

However, when speaking with von Hildebrand and Gomez, it is clear that for them, the most significant impact of the years of working together with these communities was the return of their pride and dignity. Recounting a meeting to discuss the creation of the national park, Gomez said:

> Our responsibility was… to create those spaces where they themselves could change paradigms – reaching the institutions, the governments and spaces in which they could actually speak for themselves. Indigenous Peoples going to the IUCN meetings, creating their own speeches and being able to say "This is us."…That was a hell of a lot of work, and we knew that it was our contribution: not only doing the work internally, for them to be strong, to feel proud and dignified, but actually *exposing* them to those difficult moments when they would have to go to Congress, or to speak to the Minster. There was a moment when the Pira Paraná [River] was severely threatened by mining...We had this council with the Minster of Culture and the Minister of the Environment, during which [the leaders of the tribes] had to convince the Ministers that they deserved to be a World Heritage Site. We took a holistic approach, naming that the [park had to] transcend this reductionist way of understanding only the territory – that their heritage includes sacred sites, music, *Malocas*, stories, dancing, etcetera. The Minster of Culture said, "This is too ambitious, we can't recognize all this because we can't commit to protect all of this. So chose *one* aspect of the territory and culture." And one of the leaders said, "Thank you Minister, this is really interesting, but our territory is like a body – you can't protect the eyes, then cut out the liver. I'm not asking you to *protect* my territory, just to *recognize* it. Your mission is to recognize it, and my mission is to protect it. I need your green light and confidence, but I also need you to trust me. I need you to trust me: *my* mission is to protect my people, let *me* do that."

Describing this same change, von Hildebrand said:

> Our greatest achievement is that they have recuperated their dignity, they are proud to be Indians, to have their language, and to have their worldview and navigate with it….The point is that they recuperated their confidence in their cosmology, in their understanding – and now they sit with the government and say, "We also have a culture" and talk with absolute confidence. They talk with you the same way as a French or a German or another culture would come sit with you and have a chat. You don't feel you are talking with a people who feel they have been segregated or undermined – not at all. Now I talk with them and they run circles around me – because they know my culture *and* their own. It has changed completely….And even if that worldview is not as profound as their ancestors' cosmology, they can still tap into their understanding of themselves and of nature, tap into that intimacy, through medicine, and their traditional mythology and rituals, which they can recite like a mandala, repeating certain energies. They can still reach into themselves and into nature. It is *in* them. Since we are nature, it is all *in* us. We come from nature, we evolve from nature, and it is within us. It is just a question of identifying it, pulling it out, listening.

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C. "The Path is beyond…" Dzomo la Mupo's Work in South Africa

1. Context

The Vhavenda live in the Soutpansbeg Mountains of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The Vhavenda coalesced as a people at the beginning of the 9th century, with the founding of the Mapungubwe Kingdom, which held power in the region until 1240; during this time, the people of more than 27 different tribes united into one kingdom.[47] Today, roughly one million people in South Africa speak Tshivenda. During Apartheid, the Venda were granted a 6,500 square kilometre "homeland," outside of which their rights were tightly restricted and their movements controlled, as per Apartheid policy.[48] The Vhavenda's traditional cosmology is founded upon a strong sense of connection with their ancestors, who are venerated and remembered in daily life and through ritual. Traditionally, the Vhavenda held a reverence for every aspect and element of the natural world - in particular sacred sites, called *Zwifho,* the source of local biodiversity and the home of *Vhadzimu* (ancestors' spirits). However, the influence of Christianity under colonization and Apartheid eroded the degree to which *Zwifo* are honoured and stewarded.

The story of Dzomo la Mupo is the story of how, by intuitively following her dreams and the instructions of her ancestors, Mphatheleni Makaulule slowly attracted a large group of elder women who, after reclaiming their traditional authority as *Makhadzi* (protectors of sacred sites and mediators between their communities and the ancestors) became a powerful force capable of defeating some of the mining corporations who have sought to desecrate the Vhavenda's sacred sites. The *Makhadzi* of Dzomo la Mupo have also revived sacred seeds, advocated for a return to Venda spirituality and ritual, planted thousands of trees every year, catalogued Vhavenda customary rules, and led trainings and workshops designed to connect Vhavenda youth with sacred sites and forests. Most of all, they have waged a determined, multi-faceted decolonization campaign: at root, Dzomo la Mupo's work has been about helping the Vhavenda to re-embrace their own indigenous cosmologies, proudly reclaim traditional rituals, and reconnect with their sacred sites and forests.

2. Retreating to the forest to heal

Mphatheleni Makaulule is the 11th child of a traditional Venda healer, farmer and leader; she spent her childhood learning from her father and a host of elders actively practicing traditional Venda spirituality, medicine, and agriculture. In 1999, when Makaulule was 20 years old, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and admitted to the hospital, where she spent a week arguing with the doctors, insisting that they release her so that she could care for herself using traditional medicines. Eventually, contingent upon her promise to take the required western medication, she was allowed to leave the hospital, where she went directly to a mountain sacred to her family. Makaulule described how:

> When they eventually released me, I went straight from the hospital to the mountain and ate what I knew to eat from the forest. I took their tablets, but I recovered because I was drinking and eating many things I got from the forest… I wanted to stay on my own. The forest [I was staying in] was my uncle's farm, but nobody was staying there for a long time. It was a forest, and the house had plants up to the door – you had to make a path to even open the door! But I was never scared, I remember I never had any day when I was scared. This is where my grandmother was buried, on that farm. And that place where I was staying is our sacred mountain, our *Zwifho* of our clan…. I never planned that "I have to connect to my ancestors;" it was a way of life for me. I was not saying, "I want to connect." Only that "I want to be on my own and I want to be in the forest." [And] that was my mission: I want to be on my own to heal this sickness by eating and doing what I know my father would be doing to me to get out of this illness.

During that time living alone in the forest, Makaulule slowly opened to a deeper spiritual connection to

[47] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venda_people
[48] https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/homelands

the land, her ancestors, and the natural world. Speaking of this, she said:

> If you are going to the forest and spending time with rivers, springs, the natural forest – this is where the spirituality is. But you don't *plan* that you are looking for spirituality – you make yourself *available* there – you connect naturally. What I am saying was what was happening to me. It was not that I had to close my eyes to pray. Our ancestor spirits guide us to do these things as a way of life – my staying in the forest was to live the life I longed for, because that was the way I lived with my father in our home. Dreams come, healing comes, energy comes from the forest. I was making myself available. Even if I'm tired or alone, it is cool in the forest, I only hear the things of nature from outside... People were scared for me – "There are rituals made there [in the forest], there are people who can do this or this to her!" – even my big sister came and got scared, asking me "How are you staying in this darkness, this place of this forest, and alone?!" but my mind was not having to think about it. My mind was happy.

After her father's death, Makaulule had often visited elders in her home community to learn from them; She described how "When I was in university…that breakdown of interconnectedness made me go back to the community and learn from the elders...Because my father had passed away, I went to the elders of my clan, asking, 'Why, in this clan, do we have traditional healing?' I started to go around Venda learning from different elders…because I wanted to be on this path. That's how people learn and experience." During her time in the forest, she continued to yearn for connection to elders, especially those in her extended family. She began to travel around with her uncle, "going to stay with elders, going to rivers, following elders." Makaulule would also sometimes walk to the nearby village four kilometres away, to sit with the elders there to talk with them and learn from them. Eventually, as a shared sense of joy and connection arose, people from the village started walking out to her home in the forest at the base of the sacred mountain to continue their conversations.

3. Informal elders' meetings in the forest

For months, Makaulule and elders from the nearby village met informally, drawn together by their shared love of their peoples' indigenous traditions. Eventually, Makaulule proposed that they build a proper meeting place there in the forest, and the idea was greeted with enthusiasm. She explained:

> I was there, available in the forest, having my time, where my ancestors guided me, and got me connected to them. Even though I didn't plan to connect. I got that energy – and when I got to the nearby village – people are interested, they just came and participated in what I'm doing…I easily connect with the people in the village. It was just like playing. The elders there – they love culture, they love the forest, they love doing things of the past. They just came…The other people in the village, they came, just enjoying what we were talking abut: the culture, our ancestors, the forest, climbing that mountain, walking inside the forest. People enjoy that. That's why when I said, "Can we build a homestead?" it was easy for them to do that…We built that homestead, and then people started to come there to learn. There I was having groups at the homestead where we talked about how to continue on our path. I met many people who wanted to continue the path.

That homestead became "Luvhola Cultural Village," where, together with elders, Makaulule began to talk and teach about Venda spiritual and ecological traditions. However, Makaulule often had more courage to discuss and proclaim the spiritual aspects of her culture than the elders, who were more impacted by lifetimes of colonial and Apartheid oppression. She described how:

> When we first sat to talk about sacred sites, *Zwifho*, women would say to me, "Don't talk about *Zwifho*! The Christians will be angry at us!"… Because that time was the time when if you even say "*Zwifho*," you will be an outcast of the community. People at that time who were doing the rituals, people would say of them, "You are a demon person"… [Similarly, on one occasion] in 2005, when we were doing the meetings to talk about sacred sites, I was in a very far village in the *Zwifho*

> mountain, with very old elders who have now passed on. They said, "Mphathe, don't talk about *Zwifho* aloud!" They didn't want to be stopped [from practicing their traditions]. But because I have pain – I don't know why the Creator put that pain in me – the pain touches me to become aggressive, because I see the cruelty which is getting me, which is disconnecting the younger generation. Which they teach among many clans - that it is "not right" to do our own rituals, that we have to do this other spiritual path, [Christianity], which was brought here. But that's how people become free to do [our spiritual practices] – by talking about it!

Eventually, the outside world began to take notice. Makaulule was awarded a fellowship in the United States for youth who "defend their vision as a democratic right," during which she studied at Harvard University. Upon her return to South Africa, she became involved with the African Biodiversity Network (ABN) and other organizations of like-minded activists. Describing her experiences in those years between 2000 and 2007, she said:

> It is not me who did it, it was Spirit. Spirit guides us. I got guided by Spirit; Spirit guided me to meet people who experienced that type of life like me. Spirit guided us to have a group….I never plan. I never had a vision, although people now say I had a vision. I never knew I would be doing this, it's a way of life for me, it's the way I see my life….This path is beyond my understanding. It is beyond your understanding, too: you can understand half of it or less than half of it...I read books. I did this fellowship, I met the ABN people - they just came to me because the Spirit was guiding. Through ABN, I attended many meetings. Spirit prepared me and the path to walk. I ended even going to the Amazon and learned deeply the same things that were in my heart; Spirit took me there… It is beyond. We walk, we communicate, we write – but Spirit is sending you beyond your own understanding….It is the task which we are chosen to do, and this task, we don't choose, we are chosen. That's how I walked the path - because I trust the path. When I was sitting in the Amazon, the shaman said, "We must trust the Spirit that chose us, and we must trust the path. The spirit that chose us is the one that will guide us." I believe so much in that. You will only know what you want, but this is beyond what you want.

4. Re-sanctifying the role of *Makhadzi* and founding Dzomo La Mupo

In 2007, Makaulule and a group of women elders founded the organization Dzomo la Mupo as a more formal platform to revive traditional Venda culture and protect sacred sites. "*Mupo*" is the Vhavenda word for "All creation, including the cosmos;" *Dzomo la Mupo* means the "Voice of the Mupo." Dzomo la Mupo's work is focused on preserving and reviving cultural diversity in South Africa,[49] and is powered by the revival of the traditional role of *Makhadzi*: women elders who are ecological knowledge holders and protectors of sacred sites, who mediate between the human and spirit worlds.[50] Makaulule explained how the role of women as protectors of sacred sites was undermined:

> During colonial times, people began to be criticized for doing rituals with the land by people saying "It is un-Christian, it is bad." I experienced this myself. When I reached university, I found many people who criticized traditional healing as un-Christian and demonic; and this also happened to the Venda people. We have the role played by the *Makhadzi* – this is the role played by a woman in ancestral rituals and in prayer. The *Makhadzi* daughter receives seeds, growth and new life, [she is] the one who receives growth, the one who receives new life….The one who produces new life is the one who carries the voice of prayers through the sacred sites to reach the Creator. But colonization came and erased that, saying, "No more rituals, no more *Makhadzi*." In the Bible they say "A woman must not talk." When I went to the university in 1990, that teaching was so deep, that women have no role, that men are ones who preach.

[49] Dzomo la Mupo's mission is "for all people in South Africa to be proud of their cultural heritage, to experience religious freedom and nutritional food sovereignty, and to protect and restore the critical ecosystems of their territory in the way that the ancestors were doing long ago." http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/

[50] https://img.bulawayo24.com/articles/THE%20ROLE%20OF%20MAKHADZI%20IN%20TRADITIONAL%20LEADERSHIP%20AMONG%20THE%20VENDA.pdf; https://africa.cgtn.com/2019/03/27/faces-of-africa-the-protector-of-the-sacred-sites/

For Makaulule and the women she had been working with, re-establishing the authority of the *Makhadzi* was a important first step: once they had reclaimed their spiritual authority, that authority could then be the powerful foundation upon which they could actively work towards the protection of Venda's sacred natural sites and forests.

Over the next decade, Makaulule and the group of elders who first started meeting in the forest grew and changed significantly. However, the basic format of how the organization works is quite similar to how it began, there in the forest at the base of the sacred mountain: elders gather and begin a dialogue, then collectively agree to launch projects or take actions that reflect their concerns and protect their culture, land, and ecosystems. Describing their meetings, Makaulule said:

> I always open every meeting of Dzomo la Mupo in this way: when we start meeting, I ask, "Why are you here?" We know each other; we have been together more than 15 years, but I enjoy to open meetings in this way. "Why are we here?" Yes, we invited you to the meeting; yes, we want to talk about this or that; but WHY did you come to this meeting – why did you personally decide to come?...I learned this from another elder. She is not able to walk anymore; we love her…There is something which is used to beat the children, a small stick from a tree, and we used to say "Hey hey hey, keep quiet," and hit them with the small stick. This woman would say, "You know there is something like a stick, beating your leg and saying "Hey hey hey, stand up and walk to Dzomo la Mupo for the meeting!" And we would be talking up to midnight, not sleeping. This something which holds that stick and says "Go to Dzomo La Mupo for the meeting!" What is that for you? Why didn't you stay at home? What was it that was beating you? Because most of them were elders, but they could not stay at home. That driving force is beyond ourselves. And the energy which we get from our work is beyond ourselves.

To accomplish its vision, Dzomo la Mupo works on multiple themes that coalesce into a coherent, comprehensive approach to protecting Venda culture, spirituality, and sacred sites. To protect sacred sites, it fights against national and global investors, government officials, and chiefs who seek to desecrate these sacred areas for business ventures; to ensure the sacred forests thrive, the Makhadzi plant trees and promote the resurgence of the sacred rituals necessary to care for the forests and ancestors. And to make sure that they have the materials necessary to perform these rituals, they cultivate - and promote the growing of - finger millet, a sacred variety of seed integral to Vhavenda prayer. To protect their tenure rights and strengthen their indigenous practices, they have supported their communities to map their ancestral territories and write down their customary rules. Finally, the *Makhadzi* work diligently to share their knowledge with youth and awaken their relationships with sacred natural sites. These activities are briefly described below.

5. Protecting sacred sites and planting trees

For the Vhavenda, there are two main categories of sacred sites, *Zwifho*, which are sacred sites and natural shrines, and *Zwitaka*, or *Taka*, which are holy forests.[51] Since its founding, Dzomo la Mupo has been at the forefront of political and legal challenges to corporations who, with the South African government's approval and permission, have sought to build upon or mine a variety of Venda sacred sites. In 2010 and 2011, companies tried to site tourism ventures on two important sacred sites: the Phiphidi waterfall and the Thathe forest; the Vhavenda people, led by the *Makhadzi* of Dzomo la Mupo, challenged both projects.[52] And in 2013, Dzomo la Mupo was instrumental in stopping Coal of Africa (CoAL), an Australian mining company, from siting new oil wells throughout Venda territory. The enterprise would

[51] https://luonde.co.za/culture-religion/vhurereli/

[52] In 2010, Dzomo la Mupo went to court and successfully stopped the Tshivhase Development Foundation Trust from developing the resort around the Phiphidi waterfall however, despite the legal victory, the hotel and tourist development was constructed. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-10793664; https://mg.co.za/article/2018-05-04-00-battle-to-salvage-the-soul-of-vendas-sacred-sites/l https://theecologist.org/2011/mar/08/celebrating-women-activists-south-africas-mphatheleni-makaulule; https://luonde.co.za/culture-religion/vhurereli/

have transgressed sacred sites and significantly disrupted the region's water supply.[53] Describing these advocacy efforts, Makaulule said:

> The impacts of this work which we do at Dzomo La Mupo have come to the government, because if not for us, the government would be having much power to destroy all the trees. And the government would be having power to mine underground, and they would go straight to our sacred sites…The Dzomo la Mupo power is the loud voice, which is there, and we don't keep quiet – it goes to the ears of government that "You cannot mine the scared sites!" That's how Dzomo la Mupo impacts the sacred sites. It is the habitat of *Zwifho*. Because if you disturb the forest or go underground and remove the minerals, you disturb *Zwifho*, and make there no more indigenous forests, and you are disturbing *Zwifho*. Dzomo la Mupo is opening the eyes of the top authorities in government about what is the value of *Zwifho* to the custodians, to the community, to the whole village... People say "Mphathe is the blocker of development, of money coming to Venda, she stopped this mining project and that mining project!"… And there are even chiefs who say, "Don't call Dzomo La Mupo, they are dangerous!" but the impact of our work is that you get the government to not go into the sacred sites.

Dzomo la Mupo's *Makhadzi* advocate that investors and government officials should respect *Zwifho* and Z*witaka*, just as they respect temples, synagogues, churches, and mosques. They repeatedly warn – in public forums, in the media, in meetings with investors, and with government – that violating the sacred sites and forests will lead to severe droughts, as they are, for both spiritual and scientific reasons, the heart and engine of the region's water cycle. Makaulule explained the sanctity of the sacred forests:

> I survived by *Taka*. When people say "spend time in the forest" it is just to walk with the spirits. We don't have the *Zwifho* if we don't have that. We protect the forest, which is inhabited by *Zwifho* and cannot be violated. You cannot make a hotel inside: you are disrespecting the *Taka* of the forest – which is not [only] the trees, but even the soil, the reptiles, everything is *Taka* – *Taka* has all these things which we see and we don't see with eyes. *Taka* is a very, very important place where we don't learn what see with our eyes, and don't see what we think what we see – it is beyond. That's why Dzomo La Mupo are saying "to *Taka* we are standing up, we are even planting the trees, because *Taka* has to be."

To help protect the sacred sites and forests, the *Makhadzi* spent five years working with elders to collectively remember and document the Vhavenda Peoples' rules and taboos concerning sacred sites, which they then catalogued and widely published. Makaulule relates how:

> Sacred sites are not even a place to go to dig wild plants and pick fruits – there are healers who want to go to these places because there are no more forests [to gather wild plants and medicines], but we talk with *Makhadzi* about the laws of *Zwifho*. I held those meeting for more than 5 years – learning about the laws of the big *Zwifho*, writing the rules, combined with the understandings of the policies of government and the environmental laws. But the deeper laws were from the elders.

12 Principles of Dzomo La Mupo
For the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Biodiversity in Venda, South Africa

A. Sacred sites are not places of entertainment or for playing sport; they are to be protected and respected.
B. Construction work of any kind, especially hotels or entertainment centres, is not allowed in sacred sites.
C. Those who are not the custodians or guardians of the sacred site have to respect the boundaries and should not enter within.
D. Sacred sites are not tourist attractions; they play an important role within the ecosystem and society.

[53] https://intercontinentalcry.org/the-voice-of-the-earth-and-the-fight-for-mupo/

E. Sacred sites are not dumping grounds for litter or rubbish.
F. It is forbidden for anyone to chop down a tree in the sacred site, or fetch firewood.
G. Sacred sites are places for ritual activities and spirituality; only chosen clan members from origin can be custodians who perform the rituals on behalf of the whole community.
H. Sacred sites are to be respected by everyone, including the custodians, the whole community, and people passing by.
I. Sacred sites should remain as undisturbed ecosystems; the trees and the atmosphere are essential for creating the right conditions for rain across the whole region.
J. It is taboo to move or replace an object in a sacred site from its original place.
K. Sacred sites should be respected by the government, and they should know that they have to discuss with the custodians first before proposing any project involving the sacred site.
L. The sacred site is not only the forest on the surface, it goes far down to the under-soil and far above the sky and the stars.

(http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/12-principles-of-dzomo-la-mupo/)

Planting trees is a key component of the *Makhadzis'* efforts to protect their sacred forests and the overall biodiversity of the Venda region: each year the women propagate thousands of trees in small nurseries in their homes, then gather together in groups to plant them. Since Dzomo la Mupo's founding, they have also distributed more than ten thousand tree saplings to schools, botanical gardens, traditional authorities, and municipalities, as well as taught communities, families and children how to start their own tree nurseries. Makaulule explained how these efforts relate to their larger vision:

> At *Dzomo la Mupo* we plant trees…The forest is the important thing. We realized that it is better that we replace the trees. We learn about trees, we walk in the forest, we pick seeds and germinate them, and then go and plant them back in the sacred sites, to *Zwifo*, to the river. We women produce 15,000 trees a year; I was counting them today. We are 74 women, producing trees…. When it is hot, people stand by my house in the shade of the trees. We plant trees to go back to what we are talking about – to restore this thinking back to people's minds to respect the trees…The forest is our teacher, it is our healing place. If we don't have forests, we are not going anywhere. We will lose. We think we are losing just the trees, but really we are losing life, which covers us.

6. Reviving ancestral seeds and defending ritual

The *Makhadzi* of Dzomo la Mupo also campaign tirelessly for the recovery and re-cultivation of traditional Venda agricultural seed varieties. As a result of the women's efforts to find, recover and promote their traditional foods in workshops and classes, they have successfully revived the cultivation of a number of local seeds, including local varieties of maize, beans, sesame, and a range of indigenous vegetables.[54] For the *Makhadzi*, these seeds are far more than agricultural inputs: they are a foundational component of Vhavenda culture. Makaulule explained: "We have an interconnection with the seeds, which are for us not just something to plant. We respect the traditional protocols about the seeds: before we even harvest, we have seed rituals. It is not just to go and plant the seeds. From when you are a baby, there are rituals accompanied by seeds."

Of particular importance has been the *Makhadzis'* recovery and promotion of finger millet (*Mufhoho* in Tshivenda). Finger millet is both a staple food and a sacred seed central to Vhavenda ritual. Central to this effort have been very personal decolonization efforts: first reclaiming that their traditional rituals are not "demonic," as they have been told for generations, then being courageous enough to perform these rituals, using finger millet as their ancestors once did. Makaulule described how:

> We do dialogue to equip ourselves as *Makhadzi* that finger millet is the right thing to do – it is not wrong, this we talk about…We talk together about the uses of finger millet as an important plant.

[54] http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/seed-security/

> We end up getting to the point of doing small rituals to inform different ancestors and say, "This is what we are doing."...I use that millet, I use that water, I use the tobacco to say my prayer. This is what we do.

Indeed, before they could support others to do so, the *Makhadzi* of Dzomo la Mupo had to very deeply confront their own internalized colonization - and the accompanying shame and fear - surrounding their traditional rituals. Makaulule described how:

> My intention was to bring out that *we can all do rituals*…Even in the forest, I was doing rituals. My ancestors touched me to make pain which I cannot persevere [through] when people demonize me. I was fighting that – I wanted to be free, out of being told I was a demon…. It is not crazy to say that there is *Zwifho*, to say there is a rituality in us who are called Indigenous Peoples. Because we are created by Mupo, and our church is in the forest. I will not tolerate a person who say "our ancestors are demons, our ancestors are demons."… At my father's home, we still do rituals, at my clan we still do rituals. These rituals are not public things, but I am the person, who, when I come to a place, I don't stop thinking about my culture, about what I do – and it is not me alone who does like this, other people were also doing rituals without hiding, not keeping quiet. Many people around Venda preach that we are "the demon people" – but rituals are happening, happening. But [I] come in and mobilize those people that "Yes, we are 'demons' and *we will not keep quiet*!"

For Makaulule, rituals are just as much a kind of governance as they are elements of spiritual practice:

> We are the Venda people – we do the rituals, we do the communication with the spirits. I will use an English word to describe this: it is a "governance system." For us, it originated with our ancestors, it is a way of life which originated with our ancestors…Ritual is a kind of prayer; you don't just eat food without thanking the Creator. Ritual for us bounds us to say "thank you" as a protocol. People are destroying the land, destroying the forest, destroying the sacred sites. I believe that the Creator gave us rituals as protocol and procedures for how to relate to the land, as prayer, as a way to bring you to give back, not just to harvest and take. It is a guiding principle…We do rituals because that is the governance system for humans: otherwise it is just "take in, take in" to get what we need. There must be a governance system. A way of doing. A way of appreciating. A way of supporting, not just taking, taking…This governance is the way of thanking. Not just take, take, take and live freely…Ritual is prayer for us. I have to do prayers to appreciate, to thank for the opportunity, to request assistance. We do rituals to ask the trees to become the cover of our life.[55]

For the Vhavenda, ritual is an integral part of every stage of life, and how, through participating in each ritual, people learn more deeply about their culture:

> You know, in Venda, I'm learning about intergenerational learning. You are born a baby – the elders do rituals. Rituals are not only for sacred sites, and not only for *Zwifho* – rituals are our energy, our protectors, our building blocks of our lives. Like amino acids are the building blocks of protein, rituals are the building blocks of our life. They do rituals when you are born, when you grow up and get matured, they do rituals when you are sick, they do rituals when you arrive at the stage of development of adolescence. Our initiation schools are made up of rituals – you can't do initiation schools without rituals. When you get married they do rituals; when the boy and the girl get married, there must be rituals to connect the two families. When your wife is pregnant and gives birth, there are rituals. And when you die, when they bury you, they do rituals – and those who do those rituals, they are elders. When you become an elder, you become part of transferring in practice this intergenerational learning because you have been *in* all those

[55] In Venda culture, rituals must be done at certain cyclical, seasonal times of the year. Makaulule explained how: "This is our relationship with the land: an interconnection. If we don't do the rituals for the sacred sites at the beginning of spring, we have doubts, we don't feel comfortable, because from our experiences, we have to first request through rituals; we have to first do the rituals so that rain comes and we harvest. We have to first request harmony, because if we don't do that, we will experience bad things."

> processes. When you become an elder, you become a ritual maker for the newborns. The stage of becoming an elder makes you to become the person to do the rituals….And when you are in that process, you go to sleep and dream, and in that dream [the ancestors] are guiding you, giving you messages…The next step, after being an elder: you become the spirit. Because when you are a spirit, you become more powerful – able to plan things; when you are a spirit you do more. You protect more, you give energy more…We all follow that path.

Because each Vhavenda clan has its own form and manner of performing rituals, neither Makaulule nor the *Makhadzi* teach ritual making or share their clan's rituals with others as an example. Rather, their primary focus is the *promotion* of rituals, and the concomitant assuaging of the secrecy and fear that many South Africans hold towards their own indigenous rituals. She explained: "You can't teach the people to do rituals because every clan has their own rituals which is part of intergenerational learning. You grow up seeing it – you grow up doing it, you are not taught….We don't teach about rituals. I only make a platform that rituals are the right thing to do, 'you are not wrong.'"

7. Promoting intergenerational learning

In villages and schools across the Venda region, Dzomo la Mupo teaches youth about their ancestral seeds, the importance of rituals, and about appreciation for *Mupo*, *Zwifho*, and *Zwitaka*.[56] It does this by holding gatherings, celebrations, workshops, and fieldtrips, within which elders share their knowledge with youth. Speaking of one such recent field trip, Makaulule described how:

> I told the children; we are going to the forest to see the *Ziwfho*. When I started that trip in the morning, I told the people in the taxi that we are going to the *Ziwfho* places, and briefed them about the sacred sites, places for ancestor spirits, places of nature, places where energy is there, spiritually. Then I requested to everyone that we are going to spend the whole day with "no more my voice"…When we reached the waterfall, I requested them to go there on their own but implementing much "no more my voice." They went there. … Then we walked to the lake, and much time was "no more my voice." We walked along the lake on our own, "no more my voice"...We had started our trip at 8:30 in the morning, and at 4 in the afternoon we broke the silence. There was a student who came to me and said, "In my whole life I've never before forgot my cell phone. Today I experienced the feeling of forgetting my cell phone." Another student said, "This is what we need." Different students were coming to me, telling me about the experience of becoming calm, and for me it was that they have connected back to themselves, to their inner person, to their real selves. Just imagine if that experience was done for three days, or even a week!

Dzomo la Mupo encourages youth to compare and critically analyse differences between the past and the present, and to be curious about their traditions and ancestral ways of life. Makaulule described her commitment to intergenerational learning over the years:

> They brought children [to me], so many children. Every five years I grow up a team of children. They are big now, those first groups of children. They enjoy to be there [in the forest], they beat the drums – that's why the place is recognized by tourists as a place to see authentic [Venda] culture. Children were running, coming to the forest, where there is no electricity, where there is light only by the moon…The teachers bring their school children there – even now, I am still working a lot with the children. In February I was doing the ecological calendar with the children; I wanted 5 children, but 40 children came! And we enjoyed to draw. I put a question to them: "Go back home" – I gave them papers – "and draw everything which you see on the path, when you walk from the gate at home until you reach the school gate. Then, after drawing, take everything that is related to your culture." The following day when they came, *every child* wanted to present their drawings…I [once] went to another village on the mountain. I was having 21 children for 3 days, and we were drawing the foods which are found in the forest, from the wild. They enjoyed, the children – and we sang,

[56] http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/

> we danced. The elders are teaching them the songs, beating the drums, dancing, we were doing the ecological calendar. Children love to be engaged, they love to be part of this.

To further propagate the revival of Venda culture and traditions, the *Makhadzi* of Dzomo la Mupo also train young teachers about their cultural heritage, so that those teachers in turn can integrate Venda culture into their curriculum. For these modern teachers, spending a night in the forest can be a revelation, an opening of a door back into their culture. Makaulule explained:

> We do workshops with the teachers in the forest, and we have this saying "My nose out of the blanket at dawn, at 3 am!" To go and feel, see the stages of dawn, until the sun rises. I take teachers at the schools to do that. They say, "No! I can't wake up at three!" But it's not for their whole lives, it is just for one day. They wake and walk out and feel chilly, and start to see the stages of dawn, and they say, "My mother used to wake up at that time. I never recognized we have the names of the many stages of dawn!" The orange colours, the colours appearing, the orange, the red, when the light starts to come. They enjoy to experience that, and they say "We enjoy to be in our bodies and feel we are alive."

8. Impacts: decolonizing hearts and minds

At root, Dzomo la Mupo's key task is the task of decolonization, of slowly stripping away the fear, grief, shame, guilt and other blocks that separate once-colonized people from their indigenous traditions and the epigenetic knowledge that runs, alongside the epigenetic trauma of colonization and apartheid, in their blood and bones. Although the Makhadzi didn't have this word when they started, twenty years later, they are very clear that this is their mission. Makaulule explained:

> Once I was at the university [for my masters], I see that I was doing decolonization work even before I knew the word! And the impact of that decolonizing: people standing up to say, "It is wrong to build a hotel in the *Zwifho*! It is wrong to do mining in the mountains! It is wrong to teach the children so they don't know their culture!" What we are doing is decolonization….If you want to do mining, if you destroy *Mupo,* we are standing up. If you say, "Finger millet is wrong" – we are standing up to decolonize the Venda people – to stop the colonial mind in you, to stop the belief that "you will burn in hell if you touch finger millet, or do rituals in sacred sites." We are decolonizing that mind. That's why today we are saying we want to protect *Zwifho*, because of what colonization has done. That's why today we are planting indigenous trees - because people have disconnected from the forest. That is why we try all we can to protect the rivers and bring back the rivers…Our way of life was criticized, demonized, called "out-dated" – but what *makes* us is to feed that interrelationship; we can have all our modern human needs fulfilled, but it does not satisfy our "inner person." That's why even the world today is looking back at Indigenous Peoples and our indigenous knowledge. They have seen that in the way our ancestors lived: it shows the order, it shows the way to be in harmony.

Today, Makaulule is re-building that homestead deep in the forest, as a refuge for the next generation of elders and youth who seek to reconnect to their traditions. Reflecting on her life, she has this advice:

> I remember the path as I walked it. That is how I made for people not to forget their culture, not to forget who they are. Although I was not having a plan of what I was doing, what I was doing was to help people *remember*. I walked without knowing where this was going to reach. My belief, my interest - which became my passion - was that I want to live the life [that was being lived by my family] when I was born. I grew up living that life. In English I would say this is "my tradition, my indigenous ways," because for me I understand it, it is the law of the origin of our ancestors, how they lived their lives. They lived life as it has been originated by their back, back ancestors and their foremothers and forefathers, the generations which they have come from – they lived that life.

Anyone who wants to do that: trust and believe that this path does not need to be planned, to start from “Point A” and arrive at “Point B.” [I walked by] listening to the spirit of our ancestors, because that spirit of our ancestors is *real*. They come in different ways – they can come in dreams, with another force which you cannot know what is it. You can feel “I want to go to the mountain now; I want to go to the river now; I want to spend time with that elder now”– you don't plan. Follow that!! And listen to the spirit, the spirit is real – it guides! And that is my experience – this is how I can explain it: I listened to the spirit, and when the spirit guides me to go to the forest, I go there, and when the dream comes to me, I take it very seriously. A dream is my compass of direction. I take a dream very, very seriously. And, according to our culture, our traditions, a dream - you need to perform it when you wake up, and when you go on the following day, the following week, the following month, the following time, you walk that dream. That is how I did it. I did it by listening to the spirit, by listening to my ancestors, because I trust the spirit of my ancestors – it was not that I *wanted* to do it: I trusted I was born to do it, which is why I live it alive as life….The spirits give me energy. The ancestors just make me to go on. Trust the path, and go on.

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D. "This is in my blood. Let me live it:" The Tharaka of Kenya

1. Context

The Tharaka People's lands are situated in the foothills beneath Mount Kenya in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya. The land is semi-arid, with a great diversity of flora and fauna. The geographical area of the Tharaka peoples' indigenous territory stretches across 163,600 hectares of the Tana River basin, including the Tana River its the nine tributaries. The 30 Tharaka clans who live there practice traditional livelihoods, including pastoralism, livestock production, small-scale agriculture, bee keeping and fishing. However, the decades of colonization and centuries of missionary proselytizing have taken a toll on the robustness of Tharaka culture, while their traditional territory and its bio-cultural diversity are threatened by population pressures, escalating poverty, large scale government infrastructure projects, and illegal logging and hunting.

This case study illustrates the power of how small steps to revitalize key elements of traditional culture, taken naturally and out of a sense of genuine enthusiasm and eagerness, can create the "basket" into which a profound re-connection to one's indigenous spirituality may flourish. At the start of their process, the Tharaka had lost their rituals for honouring and caretaking their sacred natural sites. Slowly, led by elders, the Tharaka revived their traditional seeds, foods, clothing, songs, stories, and traditional medicine, then mapped and demarcated their sacred sites. Only then, stronger in their identity and living out their customs, did their rituals, some of which had not been practiced in generations, begin to return. And from that place, the elders are now starting to revive and adapt traditional rites of passage, and to teach their children Tharaka indigenous knowledge and skills.

2. Learning from other communities

In 2007, as part of his duties as regional programme coordinator for the African Biodiversity Network, Simon Mitambo, a Tharaka man from Kenya, travelled to Botswana, where he spent a week immersed in Tswana traditional culture, sleeping alone in the wilderness, and learning a variety of southern African traditional skills and knowledge. According to Mitambo, although he had been living as a fully "Westernized" Kenyan until that time,

> When we were in Botswana, we were remembering the ancestors of the land, the oldest ancestors, who are like the moon, who are like the sun, who are like the mountains, who are like the rocks. [I remembered how] for us, everything is living…I learned about the four elements: earth, fire, water, air. So I started struggling to understand, "How to relate this to my culture?" The four elements took me a lot of time to conceptualize. That's how I started learning about the sunrise, and sunset. Even medicine people – when they want to make medicine potent, they wake up before sunrise, because the sun rises with gifts from nature… And all that time I was in Botswana, my mind was coming back to my home, wondering what I was doing for my community.

Mitambo later travelled to South Africa, also as part of his professional duties, where he met with the Vhavenda people. There, he again started relating all that he saw to his own community in Kenya. For Mitambo, this was a watershed moment in his life:

> It was my moment of transformation: when they were sharing their story, I could see my community through their story, and I resonated through their story…because their protection of sacred sites also goes though their clans, and I was remembering, "I think also our sacred sites are like that!" So the Venda community was a mirror for reflecting my community…. And all the challenges they faced - they had also been told their seeds were "backwards!" – mirrored my community's experiences. So I decided, "This is in my blood. Let me live it."

3. Calling together elders, telling their stories, and holding regular meetings

Inspired, Mitambo returned to his community in 2013, where he called a small meeting of the elders of three clans. He described how, talking about his plans in advance, he was warned by colleagues and

friends that he would be denounced as "demonic," and arrested by the government for reviving "retrogressive cultural rituals" like animal sacrifices. However, when he opened the meeting and described all he had seen and learned from the Vhavenda People in South Africa:

> They started crying, telling me "You have come at the right time." Some were crying that I had come a bit too late, soon after some very knowledgeable elders had just died. People related with the story, and started saying, "We need to bring back our millet and our stories, we need tell our children where we came from; we need to bring back or clans, our rituals!" I was taking notes from what they said, then summarizing their ideas, and saying "You have been inspired by my story of Venda, and want to revive our seeds, but how can we do this?"

The elders agreed to meet again, and between those first and second meetings, they recruited a number of other elders eager to "start the journey together." At that second meeting, they told the origin story of their people, as well as other traditional Tharaka stories related to their identity and traditional way of life. They agreed to each go back to their families and begin telling these stores to their children and grandchildren.

After that second meeting, the Tharaka elders began holding meetings every Saturday, rooting the process in their tribe's cultural institutions, the clans. Mitambo described how, among the Tharaka people:

> Our clans define our community – each clan has a story of who they are, and has a relationship with a particular piece of land…So the clans started meeting on their own, and then we met together, and I asked them, "How do clans raise their foods, and when there is a clan meeting, how is it organized? They said, "If there is such a gathering, each member offers something" – and so we started doing this: contributing each according to our capacity….and when they have a good harvest, they contribute food, and people volunteer to prepare food.

As the clan elders met, week after week, their meetings began to have a shape and a form to them that continues to this day; Mitambo described how:

> Every time we meet, we don't meet with an agenda, we meet with an *intention*. When we start the meetings, we start with songs. So many things come through the songs - our ancestors arrive, our hearts arrive, and we all feel we have arrived. We must feel we have arrived before we can start the meeting. Then the elders speak, and say, "Let us get to know one another." We have a kind of a check in: you say your name, your father's name, your clan, your ancestors, and your relations from your mother's side. This helps us make relations, because my grandmothers could be coming from your clan – so we can make relations, and treat each other like family. So we check in, and then the elders talk about something that is in their heart: they say, "Ah, today, I'd like to hear more about this, because the other day my grandson came and wanted to know about this," and then a continuation of their question is the focus of that meeting. It brings songs, it brings celebrations, because you speak, and then another person will speak from that. The stories will go and go, and we weave – like as we weave a basket. It is so enjoyable, so organic, so natural, and no one becomes bored. Our discussions bring songs – the songs come. And when they come, they come with spirit. And that is how we do it, and continue to do it.

In addition to the weekly meetings, the group decided to assign every member of the group to either be a mentor or a mentee to one another, so that, outside of the weekly meetings, "when you have deep questions, and need nourishment, you can go and meet your elders and ask your questions."

Describing the process that evolved out of those first meetings, Mitambo described how: "Every step led to another. And when we look back, we make meaning. When we are on the journey, we don't realize, but when we look back, things become clear why they happened…This work has emerged from a long journey of working with the elders and learning from them. You listen to elders, you don't ask questions

other than clarification questions… Almost every step has led to another step, and when we look behind we find meaning in the whole journey of how we have moved."

4. Remembering and reviving Tharaka culture: traditional seeds, clothing, and medicine

Over the course of the next few years, the Tharaka clan elders slowly and steadily made progress reviving and restoring significant pillars of their culture. Mitambo described this process as "a process of rediscovering. The journey we have walked is a journey of rediscovering ourselves." To facilitate the process, and create a legal structure that could apply for grants, Mitambo founded SALT, the Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation.

a. Reviving Ancestral Seeds

The elders began with what was most urgent: recovering their indigenous seeds. Mitambo explained how the effort to bring back traditional seeds and food crops arose organically:

> When we met the first time, we had not discussed very well how we would provide lunch. Then we realized it was lunch hour, and the elders had not taken anything. So we [went to a shop and] bought them bread and soda. The next meeting, someone said, "Hey, we are reviving traditions, so we should never eat soda and bread at these meetings!" So we started bringing our traditional food to these meetings. The next time, we decided we will not use plates, but look for calabash. We had to go a distance to find calabash; we had actually to buy them from a far, far market….
>
> When our culture got eroded, one of the things that was most heavily eroded was the seeds. We stopped eating our food, and started planting and eating the conventional foods, like rice, wheat; food that was not grown in our area. We started buying food from the neighbouring communities, like bananas – food that does not grow in our territory. And people started saying millet is "too laborious" – because you have to chase away birds who come to eat; with sorghum - the same thing. People stated having a low opinion of our foods and so we started losing our food. So when we decided to start eating our traditional foods, the first question was: where are we going to get our food, where are our seeds? It was a very critical question.

The answer, however, was far easier than the group expected: by the next meeting, word had spread, and a number of elders arrived at the meeting carrying seeds that they had been safeguarding for decades. In combination, they brought four varieties of millet and five varieties of sorghum – a good number of their ancestral seeds, but far from all of them. Mitambo described how finding the remaining varieties was a profound remembering process:

> Somehow this food was there, but in very small quantities, and grown only by the very old people who kept the seeds for themselves….and just grew them in small quantities around their huts…It is an ancestral responsibility to pass on the seeds to the next generation, it is not a question of whether you want to keep them, but a *collective responsibility*, in which you are accountable to the past generations and the future generations to continue to keep the seeds. So that is how seeds are very important, and that is why those old people kept their seeds….
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> What you will find in our tradition is that when we keep seeds we begin to develop relationships with those seeds. These old people kept the seeds because of those particular relationships….So because of these networks of connectedness, I guess that's why those old people courageously kept the seeds. Seeds are given to you when you marry; to start your family you are given seeds. You cannot start life, you cannot start a family without seeds: you can start life without food, but not without seeds. And the responsibly comes through our ancestors, and we are made responsible to take care of those seeds. To demonstrate this relationship between our people and their seeds, we have a story: in a time of hunger, in one of our famous families, there was a woman who was dying

> of hunger, and there was nothing left for her to eat. When she felt she was surely going to die, she told the people, "I will die any time now, but I want to tell you that below my bed, you will find a small pot with some grains of seeds. When you bury me, please make sure you plant those seeds: plant them, and propagate them." That woman had the option of eating seeds so she didn't starve to death, but she didn't eat those seeds.

The group, now growing larger every week, started to share the recovered seeds among themselves. Fortunately, that season there were good rains, the crops produced abundantly, and they were able to harvest many more seeds from those initial handfuls. With the seeds, the Tharaka People's seeds-related rituals began to return as well. Mitambo described how:

> When you plant *seeds*, there is a particular way that a seed becomes a seed - in terms of ritual and ceremonies that go with the selection…And this has become one of our central activities: before you set off in the morning, if you are setting off for a journey, you have to conduct a ritual ceremony, and you have to use seeds, as seeds are the centre of everything.

Over the past seven years, as a result of the revival of their ancestral seeds, the Tharaka community has suffered less from hunger than they have in past decades: their ancestral seed varieties, suited for the dry ecosystem they live within, thrive more than those imported from elsewhere. They now also grow 17 different varieties of calabash. Mitambo explained how:

> The revival of our traditional foods is making our community survive better – because we are in a dry area, and hunger was prevalent, but now, because we plant foods that are adapted to the zone we live in, people are thriving more than before. Pigeon peas regenerate after the spring rains, and millet, too, regenerates after harvest. The indigenous plants regenerate even when it comes to the other seasons – so we are seeing the impacts of having more food production, especially because of the [higher] nutritional value of our traditional foods…So people are seeing that our indigenous foods can grow well, and we are less hungry.

b. Reviving Traditional Dress

Because of the free-form structure of the elders' meetings, the regeneration of other aspects of Tharaka culture have proceeded in a dynamic fashion, according to the personal inspiration or vision of particular community members. The process of reviving traditional Tharaka clothing was similarly organic: at one meeting, the question of why no one dressed in traditional clothing anymore arose for discussion; by the next meeting, the women has found a local woman who still knew how to make traditional Tharaka clothing. Mitambo explained how:

> The came with another woman, having had told her "There is a group of people who are reviving traditions, and we see that you do a lot of weaving and beading." She came to that meeting, and she stood and told us she had some beading, and she talked about it and hah, we were surprised. We discussed the revival of our traditional dress – it is very nice, very colourful, very beautiful. And of course it is very much about our cosmology – the way they place the beads, the way every aspect is done, it is about our cosmology. And that's how we started.

This woman began to make traditional clothing for other women in the community, and to teach others how to do so as well. Today, women who regularly attend the weekly meetings wear traditional Tharaka clothing at these meetings. The transition to wearing traditional clothing to these meetings was not a simple one, however, as a certain degree of internalized shame had to be overcome. Mitambo explained how: "They used to arrive in other clothing, and when they got to the meetings, they would change. Then another woman challenged them, [saying] 'Are you not proud of these clothes?' So now they come from their homes in these traditional dresses, and they look very beautiful."

c. Reviving Traditional Medicine

The Tharaka elders also identified early on the necessity of reviving traditional Tharaka medicines. This effort has proved to be more complicated. First, it proved challenging to even *find* traditional healers, as traditional medicine is so feared and maligned in modern-day Kenya. This apprehension both kept the medicine people in hiding, for fear of persecution; it also kept regular community members away from the group. Mitambo described how:

> When we started we had only one [medicine man], who later disappeared. And because many people were saying we were practicing witchcraft, some of them were scared to come [to our meetings]…. Because it's highly misconceived: even the other day there was a [neighbouring] community that burnt some of these people, saying they were witches. But this is very special knowledge so we can't afford to burn or kill anyone of these knowledgeable people. Sometimes you don't know the importance of something until you lose it…. Only once we had clarified our aims, being clear what we were looking for, more [medicine people] started coming out. So we have them: there are those who come to the meetings and those who are out there but do not come to meetings, but when we need them, we are taken to see them.

Second even when traditional healers were identified, they were not able to openly share the complex, contextualized knowledge that generates the power behind Tharaka traditional medicine, as traditional medicine is shrouded in a degree of secrecy among the Tharaka. Mitambo explained how:

> Our medicine people are trained as you train doctors, they also take oaths of accountability to never use medicine negatively…Just like in modern medicine, there are different specializations: people who deal with spirit management, others with different healing capacities. You have to go through a process of initiation into receiving that knowledge because it is very sacred knowledge and takes a lot of time to fully be qualified to practice. When you administer medicine, you have to also understand other relationships: you have to understand how our clans relate, and clan relationships are very complex. You have to understand the whole system to realize the medicine – otherwise it will not work. Our medicine men are very knowledgeable, more than modern doctors, because they go beyond the plants, the ingredients and medicines they contain to all the metaphysical aspects as well. It was a hard task to find these people – you may not even know they are medicine people [when you meet them]! And there is a particular way they have to keep to that medicine – they have to handle it responsibly.

Interestingly, once they had located their medicine people, the Tharaka community members had to grapple with the definitively "un-modern" and "non-western" aspects of their traditional medicine, and work to de-colonize their own conceptions of their traditional culture:

> [In this process], we have been challenged by the need to demystify the misconceptions that have been laid upon our culture…. Because it is like: when you spit, what does that mean? Our traditional medicine men, they do a lot of spitting in their healing. We have plants that treat malaria – and for that medicine, spitting is necessary. We discussed and discussed – and we learned that the spitting is the medicine itself: it is the spitting as much as the plant. In that spitting - and chanting - is where the *real* stuff is. The other parts are functional, but the metaphysical aspects are more holistic in their treatment. Because the pain is of course coming from different levels. We want to connect all the cells, even the cancer cells, so they are all communicating. So all these things matter and need to be there, as they bring in different elements, different relationships with those who are present, those who are dead, those who are not yet born….So we cannot use it without honouring the agreements. So that's where the spitting and all the metaphysical actions come into play. Because if one of our ancestors are not feeling [happy with how the treatment was carried out], the medicine may not work.

The community's long process of understanding these ideas – "we discussed and discussed" – should not be underestimated: amidst the backdrop of fervent Christianity prevalent across much of East Africa, and in a community so westernized that the women felt shy to even walk to the meetings in their traditional clothing, the public embrace of traditional medicine was a comparatively radical move. And yet, over many years, such tenets of African medicine are again being embraced among the Tharaka. Indeed, as part of their efforts to revive their traditional medicine, the elders have worked to locate and cultivate the seeds of the plants used in traditional medicine. They also began working with children to grow these plants in the gardens at the local school (described below). The community now has plans to establish a catalogue of their medicinal plants, and to train young people to use these plants to treat basic illnesses and simple injuries.

5. Protecting Sacred Natural Sites and Reviving Rituals

The Tharaka People's process of protecting and learning to care for their sacred sites has been a long one, and is far from over. The group's efforts to revive ancestral seeds, clothing, and medicine built their pride and helped them to step more confidently into their indigenous identities. Mitambo noted that, as a result of strengthening these aspects of their culture, "There has been a lot of confidence growing in our elders. Now they are more confident to do our rituals." From that position of strength and personal empowerment, they turned to remembering their original, ancestral connection to their lands; to mapping and demarcating their sacred sites; and to strengthening the accountability systems that ensure that community members follow traditional rules governing how humans must relate to the natural world.

a. Reviving their ancestral relationships with land

Mitambo explained how the Tharaka began this process by remembering the origin stories of the clans' relationships with their lands:

> Our relationship with our land goes back to our stories of origin...When our people came to this land they started discovering their sacred sites. The land started revealing itself to people in different ways. When people went to a place and cut a tree, they realized that the tree was oozing blood, or there was a spirit that was disturbing them that night. So the land started revealing itself to them, and people discovered their way of responding to that to appease the ancestors of the land. And also when their people died and were buried in the land, there were times they invoked their spirit to be part of that. So then the land over time became part of them…
>
> [Over time] we developed relationships, which are enshrined in our customary laws, our taboos, our relationships with animals. The roles of men, women and everyone are defined by these relationships…When I talk about the governance, there are particular customary laws that guide people that have emanated from those relationships – in terms of how we relate to rivers here, trees here, to everything here. [The rules] are very clear, and they are not written anywhere other than in our hearts, so that we don't forget. When you are growing, you are told by your parents, your peers – everyone is responsible to see that this is information everyone has, and that is how we have existed in this place.

Because the Tharaka's rules came from the trees, the animals, and the land itself, they are inherently conservational in nature, concerned with protecting against overharvesting, over-extracting, or over-hunting beyond a degree that is unsustainable, or at a time of year when a species is mating, gestating, or re-propagating itself. Many of the rules and taboos have their own origin stories, which help people to remember and comply. Mitambo explained:

> When people came to the land, there were communications that were coming from the land. We have many stories of people who went to the river to fish, and when they got the fish, the fish

> spoke to the person, saying, "Leave me back in the river, don't kill me, so I can take care of my babies." But one man ignored the fish, and killed the fish and took the fish home. Then the story is that by the time he arrived home, he found two of his children dead, because he did not listen to the desires of the fish… Or it could be in a forest: I know of someone who killed an animal in the forest and then the animal's spirit came that night to complain.
>
> So what you find is that these stories carry conservation values. Because they are telling people now: don't fish in that place, because that place might have species that need to be protected. If you look at every sector – sacred natural sites, rivers, farms – you realize that there is a customary law of governance that directs you in what to do in each case...If you wrongly go and cut a tree, or wrongly go and kill something, people know and you are punished for it. You may have to give something in a ritual to heal the broken relationship: you may be asked to bring a goat for a sacrifice, or seeds for some rituals, and this is how we restore the relationships. Our judicial system was restorative. Our rules emanate from our relationships with ourselves and our people and the land. Our rules are determined by our relationships.

In a cosmological framework in which humans are woven into a web of intimate relationships with other species, understanding how to listen to the needs of each species and respect the rules and boundaries they are requesting, ensuring that the whole community understands those rules, and then properly apologizing and making amends for any transgressions is a significant part of living within the local ecosystem. Mitambo explained how, in Tharaka culture, the responsibility for maintaining these relationships is a collective responsibility:

> There are particular customary laws, taboos, particular governance rules, and rites of passage that define our roles in different ways. And if you break these rules or do not perform your role, your peers are also responsible. Your peers are the first to discipline you, and if they don't do that, those who are older than you will discipline *all* of you, because your peers are expected to discipline you. [In the past], if I did something wrong, my mother would not cane me, but report me to other boys. The leader of the age group is sought, and then leader is blamed for your own trespass. There is no way you can escape now: it is a collective responsibility to see that the land is well taken care of, and the relationships are well maintained.

Through the storytelling and songs at their weekly meetings, the Tharaka are slowly remembering and reviving these rules, and reviving the intra-clan and intra-family systems for ensuring that all community members know the rules and comply with them. Notably, the Tharaka have not yet begun to write down their customary rules, as their rules are not just simple prohibitions, but conceptually complex, made up of different interwoven layers of meanings and attached to various different stories.

b. Mapping sacred sites

Only after more than six years of regular meetings did the Tharaka community begin to map and catalogue their sacred sites. To do this, in late 2019 SALT brought together community elders, each clan's sacred natural sites custodians, and mapping technicians for a week-long exercise to map their territory. Over the course of that week, the Tharaka identified and mapped all of their sacred natural sites, which include local wetlands, springs, waterfalls, forests, and river basins.[57] To open the meeting, the Tharaka's spiritual leader led a traditional prayer, in which he called on the ancestors to be with them, to help them remember how their lands used to be in times past, before colonization, and to help them make accurate maps of their ancestral territory.

After completing their mapping process, to put people on notice, the group put up signs demarcating the eight most degraded and threatened sacred sites. Mitambo explained how:

[57] Numbering close to 40 in total, these sacred natural sites connect and form a network across the whole Tharaka territory. They are found in the form of forests (in the mountains and along the river basins (Kijege hill, Mutaranga, Ntugi and Munguni); and waterfalls (Kithino, Mutonga, Tana River, Thingithu and Kathita; and springs and wetlands (Kiguru, Igogota, Riakaindi and Ciamuria).

> The only way to reconnect with the land is to go back to the sacred sites to restore the communal union with everything. So sacred sites are critical…At the moment we have mapped 38 sacred natural sites for protection, and ten permanent rivers which are threatened and dying for various reasons. We need to protect the river basins on a large scale. We have mapped about fifteen hills and mountains with indigenous forests, and some wetlands...all of which are hotspots of biodiversity in Tharaka territory…So far we have been able to protect five [of our 38 sacred sites]….and we have discussed with the [Kenyan government's] forest department. We have not finalized that, but have [marked] some boundaries of where they should not destroy. We have put up some sign boards in strategic places to tell people that they are sacred places, and so they should not cut and destroy, but rather observe respects. People said they didn't know, so now, with the signs, they are aware: now you are on notice that this is sacred site. This we have just done recently. I'm thinking about planting some living fences – spiritual electricity – along the river basin, so when people come, they respect these places more. And another level I want is to gazette our sacred lands…All these sacred natural sites are on public lands/communal lands – so we are hoping we can claim them and maybe get a community land title.

Because legally claiming customary land in Kenya is highly politicized, and led by government officials, SALT has been liaising with the Tharaka-Nithi county government: informing them about the process; inviting government officials to witness key rituals; and advocating for the power of indigenous knowledge in restoring degraded local ecosystems.[58] The Tharaka have also connected with members of the Maasai, Kamba, Kikuyu, Mbeere and Meru communities to form a coalition that advocates for the national protections for sacred natural sites.

6. Waiting for instructions to perform rituals honouring sacred natural sites

In addition to posting signs, liaising with sympathetic government officials, and considering how to use Kenyan laws to formally claim and protect their sacred natural sites, the Tharaka community has been taking tentative steps towards remembering and reviving the traditional rituals necessary to safeguard and steward those sites. According to Mitambo, this is not just a matter of processing to a sacred site and laying down generic offerings, making broad prayers, and blithely declaring the community's commitment to honouring the land. His explanation of how the proper rituals are found is worth quoting at length:

> The way we develop relationships with those [sacred natural sites] is to develop rituals and ceremonies…These are not human protocols. It is not framed like that in customary law – it is what has been passed on, it comes through the story; it is not what living people can develop….If you got to a sacred site there is a particular governance of how the rituals happen….We are trying to revive this knowledge from memory. And there are even sacred sites where we are looking for people who have stories, and the stories we gather are scanty. So we have to wait for elders to dream. We are invoking many dimensions of sources of knowledge. There was a case where the person who did the last ritual for a certain sacred site died before I was even born. So we had to wait for an elder to dream, and we use the information from that dream now to perform the ritual. So it becomes a process. So we can't wake up today and say, "We will go to that forest tomorrow and do the ritual."
>
> [Our] governance is about a spiritual connection between the human community and the metaphysical. When you talk about the rules, the do's and don'ts, they are all special. When you do the ritual, the do's say how you do the ritual. Even when you are going to a sacred natural site, there is a particular path you follow, you can't just enter through anywhere, and there is a particular way you have to enter: you have to go without anything made by industry or fire. You can't bring anything metallic, or any clothes made by industry. So that is the governance part of it. And if you do things wrongly, it will get directly back to you, and that is why even some elders are

[58] https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/mapping-local-knowledge-to-regenerate-lands-in-climate-changed-times/

not even confident to do some rituals. And even when you enter there, there is a particular way you face, and there is particular symbolism in how you do things: if you are putting the blood, you have to put it three times or four times, the governance is very specific. And they require people to be initiated – specifically initiated to carry that information…

And when we are doing rituals in a particular sacred natural site, there is particular clan that can do that ritual, and you have to find the right person from that clan; there is a due process that has to be followed and if you do it the wrong way…it might be insulting or disrespectful – because the reason you are doing it incorrectly is because you have not taken the time to understand and to wait for information. So if no one has this information, we have to keep struggling, trying. We made a commitment that we have to find out. So we wait, and then eventually one day an elder will come with a dream, and that dream has the answers to everything we were looking for…[For example from a dream about one particular sacred site] we even learned about how to deal with the concrete that has been put there - you have to go with twigs and animal intestines and pray there, not use metal to remove them… So it's the process of digging deeper, and being patient, to understand and so not do it wrongly, which is dehumanizing. It is the process of getting to the ritual, it is the process of discovering the ritual.

In fact, *the process of rediscovering the ritual is almost more important than the ritual itself.* You will get the insight, don't just come. Don't pretend you love me, when you have just woke up and come to honour me, thinking, "This will make that person happy." You wait to understand that person, you wait to see, to learn, that is when you give the right thing. The community also cries, like you are now, by the way. These things are very powerful. Even me, I cry. It is very emotional to realize how powerful these process are. And when we do them superficially, it came be very destructive. But when you receive a gift and really feel that the person giving it has given it *knowing* you, and given you the very best gift that they could….

Rituals have been lost everywhere… What I find is that we are the last generation who knows, and that inspires me to know more...But also I say that although these rituals have been lost, *the ancestors are still living*, and if we can develop processes that connect us to the ancestors, we will get dreams in which we can get information from them about how we can revive the rituals. The ancestors are not dead: we invoke ancestors, and then get the information in the form of dreams.

We need rituals. Let's dream about them, let's look for elders, let's dedicate our time to discuss, and along the way, we realize we have done it…. Rituals go into a depth of spirituality. In rituals, we invoke a lot of ancestral wisdom, we invoke relations with our ancestors: they are deep and require clarity and preparation. Clarity is very important. Because if we are not clear, they can create more problems. For when we do things the wrong way, the ancestors will not be happy because we have not consulted them enough. They will simply not be happy. So we have to consult them and consult them so we can do the right thing, in the right way, so that the land and ancestors are happy and see that we are doing it from the bottom of our hearts…. I am saying what I have seen through the process. For when we do the right thing, and the ancestors are happy, they open the path. What is difficult becomes less difficult, and what is not clear becomes clear. We only understand later that we have been doing it the right way, doing our best. The ancestors are communicating with us.

The Tharaka clans used this deep remembering process to recover a ritual necessary to an important sacred site at the foot of a small hill that had been badly desecrated. It was so abused that the Kenyan government occasionally posted an officer there to deter people from sneaking in to sell illegally-brewed alcohol, illegally cut trees for charcoal, graze their animals, and illicitly meet their lovers. However, the inconsistent presence of the Kenyan official did little to deter the prohibited activities taking place. Eventually, Tharaka elders were shown in a dream how to properly undertake the ritual for that sacred site. Mitambo described the elders' process of slowly recovering the site and re-instating its sacredness:

We started by holding our dialogues there, and the elders started saying, "This is a sacred site, it is

not supposed to be grazed, no trees should be cut for charcoal here." Then, we called the community together to do a ritual. We invited the government, telling them "We will do a ritual to protect this place." We invited everyone to witness, so they would understand what was being done. People from the village came, even the children. The elders went up the hill and did a ritual, and came back and addressed everyone and said what they had done, and said that from that time onward no one could go up there to sell anything, do sex, or cut trees…. You know, when you tell people not to do something, it is very theoretical. When you tell them "Don't go inside there," there are even people who will then want to go inside *even more*. But when you call people, and the elders come in their regalia, with all their ceremonial things, and people see their rituals – seeing is believing, so when people see the ritual, it works better.

Because when they see the elders do what they do, some people begin to fear, they feel there is something there, more than when they just listen to the stories or are told. The strategy is to *see* what the elders are doing: they go around with intestines, chanting aloud – it made people scared. What they are doing is actually cursing – they are saying "We are cursing anyone who comes back here to do anything wrong." People fear curses, and people have seen cases where people have been cursed…. So when those words are said in the presence of people and they are seeing and hearing it – it is different then when they are told, "This is place is a sacred site." Being told is not enough. But when they hear and see the elders honoring the site and giving very clear instructions: if you go there and anything [bad] happens, don't blame anyone, it is you who have transgressed. People become more responsible; the ritual is alerting them to be responsible.

However, although the ritual may have been perceived as a "curse," the underlying framework of it was healing. Mitambo explained how: "The ritual was restorative; it was trying to *restore* the relationships, and to invoke the spirit of the land for everyone to be more accountable to the spirit of the place. It was not about punishment, but about calling people to be more accountable to the land and to the place."

By making the ritual public, and inviting not only the entire community but also the government to witness, the elders very ingeniously combined modern law with customary taboos; "double-locking" the door against people with a range of different belief systems. Mitambo explained how:

When we bring these traditional laws and *combine* them with the government laws, we find that it acts better to protect that space than the government laws alone. It works better because there are people who fear the government will arrest them and take them to court – but there are others who will not fear that, but *will* fear the traditional laws, because they know that if you do something wrong, then something bad will happen in your home. And then there are people who fear both.

Indeed, the ritual proved to have an immediate impact. Because people stopped entering the sacred site entirely, the landscape has had time to regenerate. Of these changes, Mitambo said: "if you come you find that the land is very different now: there has been a regeneration of the trees, it is like a forest now. And the elders say that some new species are there now, monkeys have come back, and some certain species of plants have come back, and the health of the forest has improved."

7. Teaching the next generation

The Tharaka elders, SALT and Mitambo have also been innovating strategies to ensure that the customs and traditions they have worked so diligently to recover are taught to Tharaka youth. They have done this in three ways: first, they invite youth to join their weekly meetings. During these sessions, the elders counsel and guide the youth, and some elders take on young mentees. Second, they started a local private school that integrates Tharaka culture into the standard curriculum required by the Kenyan government. Third, they have begun to revive some aspects of traditional Tharaka rites of passage. The latter two strategies are described below.

a. Innovating a new paradigm of education that combines traditional knowledge and western education

Mitambo explained the impetus for starting the school, and how he went about recruiting teachers:

> One of the challenges I've always found is that it is becoming easy to find the elders, because the elders are very tired by the conventional life and are really concerned that our traditions are getting lost. But the young people do not even know what are these traditions are. They are not interested, and there are all these misconceptions about our culture, that it is backwards and savage. When you want to thin a tree, and give it different shapes, you do it when it is very young. So we started thinking about that, thinking, "How can we really transfer this knowledge to the future generations at the right time?"…I was also thinking, "How can we decolonize the way our children learn?" We have been schooled to *think* in a particular way. I wanted to get these children to learn out of the box, to learn from their traditions.

So, in 2016, the community started a government-registered private school for Tharaka children. Five years later, the school now has 180 students between the ages of five and fifteen. To create more opportunities to teach about Tharaka culture, Mitambo, who personally runs the school, established outdoor education as one of its central tenets:

> I'd been reading a lot about nature-based schools in the US and Southern Africa. I was looking for people who were open to these exciting ideas….[and] I started training the teachers to keep the children engaged in outdoor learning. Our school connects to a river that we are working to protect because it is being threatened. There is a sacred site there; the place is magnificent. I encourage the teachers to bring the students out of the classroom and sit under trees and learn there, using the traditional ways of our thinking….So this is how they learn: they take walks to the neighbouring farmers, and learn from the farmers. They go to the river and learn about issues related to water.

The school is also slowly integrating programs that bring more and more of Tharaka culture into the children's school day, including a school farm that grows traditional foods to feed the children, a botanical garden, and traditional crafting classes.[59] Mitambo described these aspects, and the students' parents' reactions to them:

> We want them to eat natural food: 75% of it has to be indigenous and locally-produced. As much as possible, we want them to eat locally. So we established a school farm, around five hectares, and most of the food they eat we produce on the farm – pigeon peas, millet. We prepare traditional dishes, and the children learn how to prepare them. And one of our most traditional dishes we call *Kathongo* has become very popular. It is like our main dish now; I encourage people to cook it, and once they cook it, many people continue to cook it. So everyone is having a revolution around *Kathongo*. When we have school meetings, or on prize-giving day, our traditional meal and our traditional songs are always there….
>
> And, over and above implementing the government curriculum, we bring in other things, even storytelling and story writing…And we have started our botanical garden,[60] and a music club that sings and dances the traditional songs, and we have also started beading – the elder women gave a lot of beads [to the school] and now the young girls and boys are now beading. Usually it's the work of women to do beading, but now the boys want also to do beading…. Many parents initially

[59] Kenyan government policy requires that children are taught in their mother tongue, which has allowed classes to be taught in Tharaka, ensuring that their language is not lost.

[60] As explained above, the students are also growing medicinal herbs in the school's botanical garden, with the goal that they are able to use traditional medicines to heal themselves and each other for simple injuries that happen while they are playing in the school grounds.

> have some conceptions that this is witchcraft – but when they get there, they say, "Wow, you mean I never got these teachings?"

Such reactions reveal the complex emotions held by people who have lost their culture and customs: an initial sense of fear, quickly replaced by a subtle grief of what they have failed to receive or be taught – which can then be transmuted into a curiosity to learn. The school is thus a means of reaching not only the children, but their young parents as well.

b. Reviving rites of passage, in alignment with national laws

In addition to the school, the Tharaka elders are slowly beginning to revive their customary rites of passage. To meet today's youth where they are, they are starting with basic teachings that previous generations would have taken for granted:

> We start with something light, like taking the children to the river… Some children are shocked, they have never seen a flowing river; they think water comes from taps. Some of them have never even seen the plants that their millet comes from – so seeing the plant that their food comes from is even shocking to them. So these introductions are the first steps of rites of passage. The next level is to take them into the wilderness. Then, slowly, the next step is then to have them sleep in the wilderness. Then the next level is to have them sleep far apart from each other where they cannot see each other. The point of these rites of passage is to expose them to the wild, but at different intensities, step by step. There are children who, when they are out there, might run away [in fear] from even the sounds of the waterfall - so that's why we do it. Nature is the initiator that we have.

Because traditional Tharaka rites of passage historically involved both male and female circumcision, reviving these rites involves creatively re-imagining different challenges and trials that can play a similar function. The community is currently discussing how to adapt their traditional rites of passage into adulthood into something that aligns with Kenyan law, which outlaws female circumcision (FGM):

> When they finish fifteen years, the boys go through a proper initiation, in a traditional way with elders, with celebrations and dances, and counselling and mentorship – we are just beginning to do that. At the community level, there are more elaborate and more intensive rites of passage about maturation, supporting youth to develop relations with the natural world, the land, themselves, and with each other. These rites of passage for fifteen-year-olds are now just for boys. We used to do it for girls, but that has been come to be called FGM. We have been discussing this, and we feel we need to find an alternative within the confines of the law. We are designing a program. We are trying to find a creative way of substituting the cutting; we are talking about shaving [the initiates'] heads…. We just need to see how to make it comprehensive; it should be something inspired by our rich cultural background. The challenge with our rites of passage is that we have reduced them to be simplistic and functional – yet they should be filled with the richness of why they were very important to our culture.

As Mitambo described, such rites of passage are not only about marking a transition from one phase of life to the next, but about training and preparing young people to be responsible adults, committed to upholding the morals and ethics of their culture, and ready to become parents and conscientious members of the Tharaka community. Traditionally, after being initiated:

> [They] can begin to have a family. You don't just become a father or a mother without some preparations. They have to go through a process of preparing themselves to be in relationships, and endure relationships, and endure when they break. Society is now having trouble with people not knowing how to have relationships, or how to raise up a family. It is through rites of passage that these practices come into your life. There are songs that will keep reminding you what to do and why it is important. There are certain commitments you will be expected to make, in the form of oaths…. We ourselves have gone through these rites of passage and can explain [to the youth] why everything is important.

8. Impacts

After only seven years of work, the Tharaka people are already starting to see the impacts of their efforts: ancestral seed varieties are being recovered and traditional foods eaten again; women have re-learned how to make their traditional clothing and are proudly wearing it; children are learning Tharaka beading, songs, dances, and stories; traditional medicine and healing modalities are being revived; sacred sites have been identified, and, as their accompanying rituals are discovered, biodiversity is returning.

As they revive their seeds and reap larger and larger harvests, Tharaka women have been profoundly empowered, and are now speaking out more in community meetings. Because of the nature of women's work and expertise, many of the efforts to revive and strengthen Tharaka culture have led to significant changes in Tharaka women's sense of empowerment, as well as community recognition of women's knowledge. Mitambo described how, as a result of reviving their traditional Tharaka governance structures, women have more space to speak with authority:

> What has come out very strongly is that the women are the experts of the community….When we started reviving our culture, the women became more visible in terms of selecting the seeds, giving the guidelines and instructions of how the seeds should be planted, as traditionally, it is the women's role to select the seeds and perform the necessary rituals associate with planting and harvesting. By reviving our traditions, we are discovering more space and respect for women than in modern society. So it is more balanced. So there has been a growing level of appreciation for women throughout the process. Now we have women who are very empowered to speak about our seeds, our traditional foods, our traditional dress. Another impact has been seeing a lot of confidence returning to the elder women. They speak without any fear, with confidence. There is no other gathering where they feel they have their space other than in our community dialogues. They are valued in our meetings. They feel it, they own it.

Overall, Mitambo frames the impacts of these Tharaka's efforts as the fulfilment of living peoples' responsibility not only to their ancestors and future generations, but to the land itself:

> Those who came to the land before us, who are now the ancestors, are now also part of that land, and those that are living now are responsible to take care of the land. We have a responsibility to ensure that the future generations get the same; it is not about trying to extract from the land so that those who come later don't even find anything; its not about making money now by mining or cutting trees – its more abut having a responsibility and being accountable to the past and the future, to the ancestors and to those who are coming. We are accountable to those who left the land to us and are dead, and to those who are also coming…That is why there is a need for reciprocity – to be accountable to the land, by way of taking the maximum care of that land: even if you are cutting trees, even if you are going to take anything, you are taking it in such a way that you are not finishing it…
>
> The elders in the community are very eco-literate. They read nature and it communicates with them. [For example, in the past], when the sun got to a certain position without rain, then they knew there would not be any rain any more, so people agreed: "Let us prepare for the worst." So people organized for rituals, and started strategizing where they would go now to look for food, sending out young warriors who were strong. And so by understanding the cycles of nature, the farmers were able to organize their farms and the pastoralists were able to organize how to graze by understating the seasons…And they survived better than we are today, because people are now planting at any time. [Re-learning this] is not only changing people, it is also changing the land.

Such changes are being recognized - and people are taking notice. The Tharaka community's efforts have been recognized on national radio and in newspapers, and other tribes across Kenya have started to reach out, wanting to learn from their example. Mitambo feels hopeful:

> We are challenged by the need to demystify the misconceptions that have been laid upon our culture…Those who come across what we are doing begin to practice also. [This year] the Christians even contributed seeds for our rituals. People are seeing that the process is working: they are seeing good rains; even the Christians are starting to trust it…When you are clear and confident about the path, there is nothing difficult to stop you.

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The Tharaka community's process has necessarily had to be long and "inefficient." On the path of protecting their sacred natural sites, strengthening their culture and food sovereignty, and teaching their children about how to be Tharaka – the community has had to "go the route" of proving their commitment to the ancestors, waiting patiently for messages from the ancestors, trusting their dreams, and scrupulously shining a light on their internalized colonization, unlearning how they have been taught to think, while honing other ways of learning and listening that fall far outside the paradigms of western religion, science and accepted "rationality." Understanding this process, it becomes clear why the Tharaka community had to first root themselves in reviving so many other aspects of their traditional culture before they could deeply engage with their sacred sites and the more-than-human entities related to those sites.

Of particular note is how the Tharaka's efforts are firm but accommodative: they invite government officials to their rituals, are updating their rites of passage to comply with national laws, and are "meeting their children where they are"– beginning by showing them the plants that their food comes from, or teaching them not to be afraid of sleeping outside, activities that would never have been part of previous generations' initiations. This sense of flexibility and innovation will likely ensure that their efforts will endure: they are teaching themselves the process of remembering and restoring their tradition, which will likely become encoded into what "tradition" looks like for future generations.

More than anything, the process of discovery and revival has been profoundly reinvigorating for those that have experienced it. Mitambo's summary of their process reveals the sense of innocence, magic, hopefulness, and wonder underneath their efforts:

> So now we have gone the traditional ways, with our clothing, our food, our baskets, our plates. We eat our food with our bare hands; we connect with our food. We are more alert with the food, and I sense it is healthier. Just like when you walk in bare feet, when your feet connect with the soil that open networks of connection in your veins, it is actually a healing process. Someone was even saying that when you sing to the food in thanks for nourishing your family, it makes greater nourishment, and was encouraging people to do this. I don't have facts for that, but it seems right.

E. "You feel that you have found yourself:" The Bagungu of Uganda

1. Context

The Bagungu People live along the edge of Lake Albert, or *Itaka Lya Mwitanzige* in the Bagungu language. There are roughly 100,000 Bagungu, organized into 59 clans and 21 sub-clans. They are traditionally nomadic pastoralists, but have come to depend upon fishing and farming for their livelihoods. When Murchison Falls National Park was created in 1952, the Bagungu were dispossessed of most of their ancestral lands; then, in the late 1960's they were also forcibly expelled from the Bagungu Wildlife Reserve, adjacent to Lake Albert. Over the past few decades, significant oil deposits have been found throughout the region, including in the Bagungu's remaining ancestral lands; French, Chinese and British mining companies have established mining operations throughout the area.[61] Furthermore, over a century of ardent missionary activity and the more recent introduction of evangelical Christianity have led to the suppression of Bagungu spiritual beliefs and practices, as well as the erosion of the rituals and traditional rules that served to protect the Bagungu's many sacred natural sites. For decades, the traditional custodians of Bagungu sacred sites were demonized by the Christian churches, branded as "witches," and persecuted by members of their own community for continuing to protect these sites.

This case study tells the story of how just the simple act of creating and convening a regular, safe space for the Bagungu's sacred site custodians to meet and speak about their culture in an open forum created enough momentum and courage to revive long-hidden rituals, rules, and practices central to management of their sacred natural sites. Even more astonishing is how these custodians' effort were eventually embraced by local government; their customary rules are currently in the process of being passed into law by the district government.

2. The beginning: finding custodians of sacred natural sites

Before he began working with the Bagungu sacred site custodians, Tabaro Dennis Natukunda was an accountant working as a finance officer for a Ugandan NGO called the *National Association of Professional Environmentalists* (NAPE).[62] His keen interest in community education led him to eventually split his time at NAPE between finance and programmatic work, and in that capacity he began representing NAPE at meetings of the African Biodiversity Network (ABN). In 2007, at one of these meetings, he met visionary Africans who were working to revive their customs and traditions. He also met Liz Hosken, the Executive Director of the Gaia Foundation, who shared with him the experiences of the tribes in the Colombian Amazon.[63] Remembering this time, Tabaro learned how:

> Communities who had been colonized were trying to revive their stories, their customary laws, their traditions about the land, their food, their cosmology, and I was so much attracted. I thought, "There is a need for Africans to tell the story of their origin!" I was looking at what has been happening here in Uganda, about land grabbing, about education, and about religion, which manifests the footprints of colonialism. And I also thought that if us as Africans do not become assertive and talk about our culture, which has good language, good food, good medicine and spirituality – then this kind of colonization will not go – we will only *talk* about independence, but we will remain slaves of ourselves, slaves of colonization.

Returning from these meetings, he approached people in his own village, in the Mbarara district of Uganda, to begin a process of "going back to the root and talking about our origins, our traditions, talking about the beauty of our foods, the beauty of our forests, the beauty of our rivers, and the beauty of our language." However, his heavily-Christianized community rejected his efforts. Years went by, as Tabaro

[61] https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=0e08a54c3caa4e528d6b0b7a10adb512
[62] Tabaro is currently the Executive Director of the African Institute for Culture and Ecology (AFRICE), an NGO he founded. He is also a graduate of the *Earth Jurisprudence* training program.
[63] See Case Study B.

waited for an opportunity to lead such decolonization efforts in Uganda.

An opportunity finally arose in 2009 when he travelled to an African Biodiversity Network meeting in Ethiopia, where he connected with a woman named Kagole Margret, a Mugungu woman from Uganda who identified as a custodian of "places where we used to go for prayers," and was actively opposing the drilling of oil wells within Bagungu sacred sites. Because it was rare to find someone openly identifying as a custodian of sacred sites, Tabaro decided to follow Kagole back to her community to see if together they might begin a process of exploring how to revive Bagungu traditions. He recounted how: "In my own community, such stories could not be told. So when I got this lady, I thought, 'I should follow up, and start knowing more about sacred natural sites and the traditions and practices of communities…!'" So, on his own time outside of his professional work, Tabaro began making the five-hour drive from Kampala to Kagole's village, sitting with her and listening to her speak and share. Eventually, she explained to Tabaro that: "'I don't have the whole story, because I am not the eldest custodian. I am only a young custodian, who supports the *real* custodians who perform the rituals and practices around sacred natural sites."

3. Slowly finding hidden custodians

Prompted by Tabaro's encouragement, Kagole then gathered eight Bagungu sacred site custodians, who started meeting every month under a big tree.[64] Because the custodians had been oppressed for so long, only these eight - out of many more - dared to come forward at first. To avoid calling attention to what they were doing, they didn't call these gatherings "meetings," but rather "*Ekiganiiro*" meaning "traditional storytelling." For the first four months, Tabaro led the group through a "visioning" process, in which the custodians first remembered the past, analysed the present, and then finally made a plan for the future they wanted to create for their children and grandchildren.[65] As explained by Tabaro, these activities helped them to articulate their concerns, identify challenges, and chart a course of action forward:

> They wanted to see the rivers flowing; the animals moving freely in the wilderness; fish, and people using traditional fishing nets; to see the peaceful forests grown to their full age; they wanted to see custodians freely performing rituals, practicing in sacred natural sites. They wanted to see women growing and sharing indigenous seeds and using these seeds for different purposes – especially for performing traditional ceremonies and rituals. This was their vision, and then they said, "Now, how do we go back, when our children have joined the western education, and they don't want to hear us, they don't want to hear what we are saying, they are saying our spirituality and our customs are backwards? We are frustrated, because we know all of this was very beautiful, and this is what we would want to leave for them, but western religion is taking a big toll against us, and the people look at us as witchdoctors – they say we are backwards. Even some of us who had this strongly at our hearts are no longer practicing; they have become "saved" – they are born again Christians and they don't want to talk about this."

During these months, the group took pleasure in speaking together, reflecting, and taking tentative steps towards openly practicing their traditions. Tabaro described how: "The dialogues were very, very insightful and exciting, because we would give people time to reflect, we would walk barefoot in the forest. We would walk and sit near the lake and watch the water, watch the lake as it breathes and talks. They had their nights and days on the lake and in the forest, reflecting and praying." Tabaro described how these first months of meetings set the tone and structure of all their future meetings:

> [The meetings] would start with a traditional prayer led by the Chief Custodian, who is still alive; he is called Alon, he is around 89 years old. He is the eldest custodian and a mentor of others. During the prayer there are seeds of millet and sim sim, and others according to the kind of prayer you want to make, and then the seeds are thrown in the air and in the soil, and afterwards

[64] In the Bagungu language, these elders are called *Balamansi* or *Balegezi*, and were once highly respected spiritual leaders, with the power to interpret message from the ancestors and the authority to act as intermediaries between the human world, the spirit world and the natural world. *Balamansi* means "People who pray for the Earth." https://www.gaiafoundation.org/bagungu-custodians-map-sacred-lands-part-journey-reviving-cultural-identity-restoring-territory-buliisa-uganda/

[65] This process was adapted from the work innovated by Gaia Amazonas, described in Case Study B.

> water is put on the ground as he tells the ancestors that we are gathered here and we need blessings, and we ask the ancestors to bless our discussion, we want the ancestors to bring peace and protect us against any bad omen that might happen, and then the discussion would start. People would introduce themselves as "I am so, the son of so, the grandson of this one, the great grandson of this one, and we belong to this clan, and our totem is this one." And of course the totems are birds, trees, animals, or foods. This kind of introduction is so great: it reflects the cosmology of the community...And this is part of the governing system, because the name, the totem, the food, all of that is a governing system that is connected with the life of the community. So that kind of introduction would make a discussion for the whole day. Then the people see how they are connected with each other, and how they are connected with the rest of the nature.

Through his experiences supporting the Bagungu to revive their ancestral traditions, Tabaro himself was going through his own awakening process. He described how:

> Something that was really interesting was the way their culture was interconnected with nature – you talk of the animals, you talk of the forests, you talk of the rivers, you talk of the forest – the Bagungu are much deep-rooted in nature, to the extent that all that they do in terms of food production, in terms of fishing, in terms of wilderness conservation. They refer to nature as part of their community. And they look at themselves as one community, where there are human beings, and the rest of all other elements in nature – like water, animals, soil, insects – are also referred to as members of that community. So you talk about the human beings and the non-human beings as part of one community – and that was how they would refer to themselves. That was very exciting to me. [As I was learning about the Bagungu worldview,] I started questioning myself and looking at what I believed and what I knew since my childhood. I was wondering what I was told, what I learned in school, whether it was the truth – and I started getting a different story all together. Because for example, when I was growing up, and even up to now in my community, a snake is something evil, that should be killed, instantly, when you meet it. But in this community I found out that a snake is something that is considered very wise and symbolizes wisdom - it is something you cannot just hit and kill. My life started becoming full of questions….
>
> I'm telling you, it feels like you are in a certain world, and you are in a world which you are not sure about, because it is away from the things you have been told, and it is a life that takes you deep, deep back to your ancestors. You feel like you are with your ancestors. You feel like you are apart, deep in the forest, and lost, and then at the same time, you feel that you have found yourself. Because it is a rare kind of situation where you are used to people speaking English, talking about this workshop or that – the way forward, the laws and principles. Those things are not there – the story is flowing, and every person is living, and making gestures, and its very, very touching. And this kind of discussion humbled me. It humbled me, and I came to learn that the elders know *so much:* the elders can tell you about the science, the traditional science which most of us don't know. They will tell you "this tree you see here provides this oxygen we breathe here. And if you cut this tree, then people will get sick," and of course this tells you that some trees and some plants bring out oxygen which is curative – and then they say "that's why we don't cut these trees. That's why we cannot destroy these plants, because they provide our life. If we cut them then we have killed ourselves." Those discussions were very, very touching.

4. Reviving traditional seeds, granaries, and basket-weaving

After the first eight custodians had been meeting for six months, they opened the circle to women, who, in the Bagungu tradition are responsible for caring for, propagating and saving the seeds critical to the performance of Bagungu rituals and ceremonies. These seed custodians slowly started attending the meetings under the big tree, where they began teaching the group about the names of the seeds, the different varieties of sacred plants, and the various ways to use those seeds and plants. The women talked about how many of their ancestral seed varieties had been lost in the years that they had not been able to openly practice their rituals – and as the Ugandan government discouraged the use of local seeds while introducing and aggressively promoting the use of hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides.

By the end of that first meeting, the women decided to begin searching among themselves and the elders of their clans to see if they could find anyone who had carefully saved their traditional seeds. Their efforts were successful, and over time, as the meetings grew in size, the meetings became impromptu seed exchanges for women to exchange and share once-difficult-to-find seeds. Describing the impacts of their work, Kagole explained:

> It is so important to revive the indigenous seeds now, because these seeds have kept with us for generations. We have lived with these seeds and our grandparents have lived with these seeds. They were so useful and so nutritious, but now, with the introduction of hybrids, we have seen that our indigenous seeds can disappear and are going extinct. As a result we have seen persistent hunger in many parts of this country. These indigenous seeds help to stop hunger and famine because they are nutritious and…give us foods that can be stored in the soil and [so] help us to avoid famine...[As a result of our efforts,] we have revived so many indigenous seed varieties that we thought we had lost. We have *endemesa*, beans, local maize, local groundnuts, cassava including *bukarasa, nyalokoso*,[and] *ngwanga* varieties. We have sweet potatoes including *nyambonora, labeja, enyerebadi,* [and] *kansegenyuk*e varieties. We have a watermelon called *biwacho* and also our indigenous cucumber and many other varieties.[66]

Once the women were growing and saving more of their ancestral seeds, they started building the Bagungu's traditional granaries again, as they suddenly had more food to store than in previous decades. Furthermore, for the first time in years, the women began making the Bagungu's traditional baskets for storing millet. However, at first they could not find the grasses and plant materials necessary for crafting these baskets: because no one was making baskets, no one had been making sure the necessary grasses were growing in plentiful supply. Meanwhile the local ecosystem had changed, reducing the areas where the grasses grow naturally. However, as the sacred site custodians started reviving traditional laws, taboos and protections for their wetlands and forests (described below), and as women began harvesting and caring for these grasses, the grasses started growing in abundance again, allowing the women to be able to revive their basket making techniques.

Building on the momentum of their seed-revival activities, Kagole and other women founded a women's traditional seed-exchange association, the *Tuliime Hamwe Mbibo Ziikade* Women's Group. This group now has a garden where the women plant, care for and harvest their traditional seeds, share them with others, and teach about their uses.[67] Today, people come from across Uganda to tour their garden, share seeds, and learn about traditional seed breeding methods, as well as how to make natural pesticides using local materials like peppers, urine, ash and other organic mixtures. Spurred on by these successes, the women have also started to revive the plants used in traditional Bagungu medicine.

5. Reviving rituals

By 2016, as their monthly meetings stretched into their fourth year, five more sacred sites custodians dared to come forth, bringing their number to thirteen. As the group grew, the custodians were able to revive more Bagungu rituals. Of the 59 Bagungu clans, there are 26 "custodian clans," each of which hold the responsibility for performing different, specific rituals on behalf of the Bagungu people. To be able to carry out the full panoply of rituals necessary for honouring and stewarding their sacred natural sites, the group had to find and convince the custodians responsible for these rituals to come forward and join them. Tabaro described how "The custodians had to invite more [custodians] so that the discussion could expand - because each clan performs… different rituals from the other clans…like rituals for rain, rituals for harvesting food, rituals for fishing, and rituals for when there is a bad omen or sickness in the community." Without these individuals, their clan's rituals could not be performed.

[66] https://www.gaiafoundation.org/how-women-in-uganda-are-reviving-indigenous-seed/
[67] Id.

As the group continued to meet and grow in number, the custodians were going through their own very personal journeys of connecting more strongly with their ancestors, their traditions, and their indigenous culture. Although they had been doing some of the rituals on their own, secretly, the *collective* process of talking openly about rituals for honouring their lands and sacred sites awakened an energy that then galvanized their remembrance and revival of missing rituals. Indeed, the custodians' process of publicly reclaiming their identity and function as custodians – as well as the collective power of remembering *together* – created an internal momentum that further strengthened the custodians' communications with their ancestors. And with that strengthening and opening came dreams, full of specific instructions. Tabaro described how:

> During these discussions, whenever they introduced themselves, they talked about their ancestors; there was a connection, and I think it called upon the ancestors to come back into their presence. The ancestors gave them the way and the wisdom of how to go back through the rituals. Because after a month or so, the [custodians] knew how to perform the remaining rituals. [They reported] how the ancestors came back and told them, "You now need to go back and perform these rituals," and they would be told what to do: what seeds to use; they would be told the type of chicken to use; and they would be told the time when to go and do these rituals. So the performance of rituals came back. And of course the women identified the lost seeds for the rituals' performance…and as the dialogues went on, the custodians started performing those rituals in the sacred natural sites, which they had not been doing for the last fifty years!
>
> [Afterwards,] they would tell us different stories of what had happened, like, "In this fishing site, people saw things, they got different dreams, their ancestors were telling them they were happy because of what was happening." They would say, "We dreamt about this, we knew someone was coming." So many dreams started coming. The people who were experiencing these dreams were the custodians and members of [the custodians'] families, so it was not something that was threatening. In fact, they were happy.

As the sacred site custodians received instructions in dreams, the seed custodians were finding and propagating the necessary seeds, so that their clans would be able to follow the ancestors' instructions. The more they remembered and performed the rituals to protect their sacred sites, the stronger their connection to the ancestors became. Tabaro explained:

> So as they do more rituals, many things happen. The rituals go hand in hand with the presentation of seeds; a ritual goes with a seed, so you are "feeding" the ancestors. The custodians provide eggs and chickens, and so from there, after presenting those things, then they pray, and that kind of system goes on and on and on, and that strengthens their spirituality, and allows for the ancestors to be powerful…The protection of the sacred natural sites *are* the rituals they perform. Because when a custodian tells you that you are not allowed to pick or cut a tree in this area, and then you dare go there, then the outcomes are bad, and then the next time you will not go there, and that is how [the sacred sites] are protected. Because they say, "The more rituals you do, and the more frequently you do the rituals, the more the ancestors become stronger." The more you pray, the more you are answered, like in the Christian church.

Along with performing the rituals, the custodians also demarcated some of the sacred sites to ensure that members of the public knew they were sacred.

Notably, there was significant opposition to - and fear of - the custodian's efforts within the wider, more Christianized Bagungu community. Tabaro was approached on various occasions and "confronted by local leaders of the church, who said, 'You, man! We hear you have meetings with these old men and women who are practicing witchcraft!'" Tabaro's response, and the response he coached the custodians to have

as well, was to talk about relevant sections of African Charter for Human and Peoples' Rights,[68] and the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,[69] both of which protect Indigenous Peoples' right to practice their religions. Tabaro explained that his response to those who questioned their process was always to say: "These people have got their rights, and these are their lives, and to deny them is to stopping them to experience and enjoy their rights as human beings. So whereas we talk about other rights, these are fundamental rights, too!"

6. Mapping their territory, documenting their customary rules, and reviving their traditional governance structures

Soon, the number of people participating in the monthly meetings grew from thirteen to twenty, as the custodians invited their clan leaders. The Bagungu then began the process of mapping their lands, using the methodology innovated in the Colombian Amazon. This process, which involved making a map of the past, a map of the present, and a map of the desired future, led to animated community discussions, and to the involvement of a much wider cross-section of the community. Tabaro described:

> So the clans, led by the custodians and clan heads and their assistants, gathered for a week to draw the ancestral map. This was a map of when the customary laws were followed and there was order: the lakes and rivers were flowing… The elders were the leaders, telling us how it was, saying, "These were the animals that were found here, the rivers were here," and there was that kind of discussion, which was very lively. And of course they drew the maps by their own hands, discussing, and among themselves they were excited about this map. They were excited to say "Oh! This is how it used to be." And then after that we spent 6 months without the map – because it was taken back to their clans where it was subjected to further scrutiny and discussion, in all 26 clans, one by one. Because they had to include more features, more animals, more sacred natural sites which were not known, and then, after six months, it was a full map.

After the clans completed the map of the past, representatives of all the clans convened to draw a map of the present – "which shows the disorder and chaos of today, where the oil wells are, the roads now, the trading centres, the many boat landing sites along the lake" – and the map of the desired future, which was heavily focused on protecting the Bagungu's sacred sites.

In many ways, because the mapping was not an explicitly "spiritual" activity, but rather a historical one, it opened a space for more community members – even those fearful of African spirituality – to be involved and to talk together about how to better protect and steward their lands and ecosystems. The mapping also provided a forum for community youth – the sons and daughters of the custodians and clan leaders – to learn more about their cultural history, their sacred sites, and the geography of their original territory, before the British dispossessed them of their lands to create the national park and nature reserve. Tabaro explained that the mapping process was highly participatory:

> The youth, who were the sons and daughters of the custodians…were invited by their fathers. When the discussions began, it was also a duty for the custodians to go back and have these discussions with their family members – including the youth. And during the map-drawing, they were part of it, they would help in drawing the maps with their fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers. And, concurrently, we drew seasonal calendars with women,

[68] The African Charter for Human and Peoples' Rights Article 2 establishes that: "Every individual shall be entitled to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognised and guaranteed in the present Charter without distinction of any kind such as race, ethnic group, colour, sex, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or any status;" and Article 8 establishes that: "Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed. No one may, subject to law and order, be submitted to measures restricting the exercise of these freedoms."

[69] The United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 12 sets out that "Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains.

> who would tell the different seasons and indicate the symbols and signs from one season to another, the different birds, animals, insects and the different soils for what type of seeds and which season and which types of seeds were grown….

As they made these maps, as part of the wider community discussions of their lands, the Bagungu started to remember and talk about their customary rules for land governance, water, wetland, and forest management, appropriate conduct in sacred sites, and various other traditional Bagungu protocols. Tabaro described how:

> During all these discussions…that is the time when they started remembering their laws, because we had discussions where we would say, "Now, what were the laws governing fishing on the lake?" and they would tell us, "You should not go to the lake during this time;" "A person who was in this kind of state would not go to the lake;" "There is no selling of alcohol or drinking beer on the lake;" and "There is no going with fire on the lake;" and "You are not allowed to live or construct a house near a lake or river within 300 metres." All those were the laws, and then we recorded them. And then they started discussing about the forests: what type of trees are not cut; and how whenever you wanted to go to the forest, you would follow the instructions of a custodian of the forest; or when you wanted to hunt, you would have to follow the instructions of the custodian - all of that was documented. Then [they talked about] the laws regarding demarcation of the land, who is in charge of the land, how the land disputes were settled, all that was recorded and documented.

And so, after they had completed the mapping process, the custodians then spent months documenting the Bagungu's customary rules, which they formalized in a document titled: "Bagungu Community Ecological Governance." Then, inspired by the rule-remembering process, various clans began to re-establish and strengthen their customary governing bodies. Tabaro explained how:

> As they [discussed their rules], they revived the structures where their custodians have their systems. There was someone who is in charge of spirituality, someone who is responsible for administering medicine – so they revived their ancestral community structures….And they said, "This is how it used to be." The people were there, but they were dormant, they were not doing it. They mentioned titles, and they said: "There is a clan leader, there is a custodian, and there is somebody who brings seeds." They knew them, but some of them had abandoned their responsibilities. So they underwent a kind of remembering. And all that time, the custodians were doing rituals….When they did the rituals, the power would come back, and then the different clan structures started meeting. And then they said, "We want to meet the District Council."

It is interesting to note that although the larger Bugungu community was still very troubled by the revival of the custodians' traditional African spirituality, the more political, less spiritual, aspects of the process – mapping and rule-making – provided a platform for the strengthening of the wider community's legal and cultural empowerment. This sense of empowerment in turn led to the revival of the Bagungu's traditional, clan-based political structures, which, once strengthened, created a desire to meet with the district government to assert themselves politically.

7. Seeking government recognition of their customary rules

While the custodians were at first afraid to invite local leaders and government officials to their meetings, by the fifth year, they began to open up the process not only to clan leaders, but also to local representatives of the Ugandan government. To their surprise, because these local government officials were also members of the Bagungu tribe, they had far less opposition to the process than Tabaro and the custodians had expected. He described how:

> We started slowly, by slowly inviting the local leaders, and fortunately the local leaders - the local

> chiefs, the county and district leaders, the community development workers... all came from the local tribes. So whenever we were talking about the traditions and rituals, they had some ideas, and would say, "Our grandfathers used to do this, but they no longer do this, which is maybe why we are experiencing the drought, and having all these social problems, why our families are disintegrating, our land has been destroyed, and the forests are logged and rivers have dried – we think this is why all this has happening, because we no longer please our ancestors!" So they said, "Go ahead, go ahead, we don't have any problem!" and that supported us.

Eventually, Tabaro and the much-strengthened clan leadership began meeting formally with their local government, the Bulisa District Council. At these meetings, they presented their now-codified customary laws, and requested that the District formally recognize them as governing rules for the Bagungu territory. In November 2019, the Bulisa District Council passed the Bagungu's rules as a district resolution. Then, after rigorous review by various technical committees, the laws were eventually codified as a District Ordinance, which is currently awaiting formal recognition by the central government.

8. Impacts to date

Successfully petitioning the Bulisa Disrict Council to codify their customary rules as a district ordinance is a significant achievement, one that will potentially set precedent for all of Uganda. Politically, the Bagungu have been tremendously empowered by this process; the original group of custodians have been motivated to participate in national policy efforts: Kagole and other custodians were actively involved in advocating for the Ugandan government to become the first African nation to fully enshrine the "Rights of Nature" in its 2019 Environment Act.[70] They also participated in advocacy efforts to convince the African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights to pass Resolution 372, which formally recognises sacred natural sites and customary governance systems – and obliges all African Governments to do the same.[71] These are significant policy victories that now open the door for legal actions to protect sacred sites, and for other Indigenous Peoples across Uganda to seek ordinances that formalize their customary laws.

Environmentally, as a result of resuming the performance of their rituals and publicly demarcating the sacred natural sites, the custodians have observed changes in the local ecosystem. Tabaro described how:

> The land, which had been experiencing a dry season for the last six years – the land was very, very dry for more than six years. I remember one day, when we were there having a dialogue...we experienced a lot of rain! And interestingly, whenever we had a dialogue, it would rain….A lot of milestones had been achieved, because during these discussions, and the performance of these rules and rituals, the rivers which had dried came back. The forests that had been destroyed have started regenerating. And the birds which were no longer seen - six species of birds had disappeared - started coming back, because the wetlands regenerated. Because we demarcated the sacred natural sites, thirteen of them, the big ones, and these sacred natural sites are along the lake, and some of them are inland, and most of these are natural forests or wetlands, so they regenerated the biodiversity, and everything came back. And as I told you, when we started these discussions, rain had disappeared for almost six years - but when you go to Bulisa now!

The Chief Custodian and elder, Alon, similarly described how: "We experienced an intense, long dry spell.

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[70] The Act sets out, in ¶4: "Rights of nature. (1) Nature has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution. (2) A person has a right to bring an action before a competent court for any infringement of rights of nature under this Act.(3) Government shall apply precaution and restriction measures in all activities that can lead to the extinction of species, the destruction of the ecosystems or the permanent alteration of the natural cycles. (4) The Minister shall, by regulations, prescribe the conservation areas for which the rights in subsection (1) apply. (Ugandan National Environment Act, 2019. Available at https://nema.go.ug/sites/all/themes/nema/docs/National%20Environment%20Act,%202019%20(1).pdf)

[71] In Resolution 372, the Commission, "(1) Calls on States Parties to recognise sacred natural sites and territories, and their customary governance systems, as contributing to the protection of human and peoples' rights.(2) Calls on States Parties to uphold their obligations and commitments under regional and international law on sacred natural sites and territories and their customary governance systems, and the rights of custodian communities; [and] (3) Urges States Parties, civil society, businesses and other stakeholders concerned to recognize and respect the intrinsic value of sacred natural sites and territories." https://www.achpr.org/sessions/resolutions?id=414

We lost fields of crops, became food insecure. All our cows died because of lack of water…But when we started the dialogues, we got energised, started performing the rituals, and the weather changed. The rains began to come back.[72] The women's seed revival efforts also strengthened the Bagungu's food security; community members report now having far more food in reserve.[73]

Interestingly, Tabaro reported that despite the Ugandan government's desire to open more of the area to mining, the elders feel that their rituals have impeded foreign companies' mining ventures:

> The government is determined to mine the oil, and when we talk with the custodians, they say, "Yes, the oil mining disturbs the ancestors, but we are helpless, we cannot do much. [But] when we make these rituals, we see some reduction in oil." The coming out of the first drop of oil from the oil wells, which was in 2015 [was significant] – and now...when the custodians started doing their rituals, some of the oil which was discovered in those wells disappeared! It is because at the beginning they were compromised, in terms of performing their rituals and other practices. Because the less practiced, the less powerful they become. It is the power of ritual performance, and the consistency, that is behind the power of sacred natural sites.

As the Ugandan government continues to sign contracts with mining companies for oil exploration throughout the region, the custodians are more motivated than ever to continue their rituals, as the planned pipelines will cross - and destroy - many of their sacred sites.

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At root, the Bagungu have led themselves through a profound de-colonization process that they could have never planned in advance. When they started meeting, neither Tabaro nor those original eight custodians could likely have imagined that they would eventually revive their traditional clan governance structures, codify their customary rules, and have those rules formally recognised by the Ugandan government. Nor could they likely have predicted the speed and force with which they would start to dream and remember missing rituals, or how quickly the women would find and revive the seeds necessary for those rituals.

Much of the power of the custodians' process was about "coming out" together: refusing to hide any longer, refusing to continue to be shamed by the more western and Christian members of their community, refusing to deny their culture. The elder Alon described how:

> Much has changed since I was young. People joined western religions and abandoned traditional practices, like contributing seeds as offerings to the sites. Things became hard for us. Even people who don't belong to Christianity have belittled the work of sacred site custodians like me… Before these dialogues, we custodians were timid. We didn't speak, we didn't come out, we feared performing our roles, because members of the community labelled us 'satanic.'"[74]

The story of the Bagungu illustrates the reclaiming one's own sense of dignity is a profound engine of change, which, once achieved, manifests in a wide range of rememberings, revivals, and regenerations. Describing the deeper aspects of the women's seed-revival process, Tabaro[75] beautifully expressed how: "We don't talk about capacity building, because the *capacity* is there: we talk about *confidence building*. We say, 'Look here, this is your life, and you need to live that life.'"

[72] https://www.gaiafoundation.org/uganda-reweaving-the-basket-of-life/
[73] https://www.gaiafoundation.org/how-women-in-uganda-are-reviving-indigenous-seed/
[74] https://www.gaiafoundation.org/uganda-reweaving-the-basket-of-life/
[75] Today, Tabaro is now the founder and executive director of the African Institute for Culture and Ecology (AFRICE), and has begun to lead other communities across Uganda through a similar process.

F. "Cursing is a very serious thing:" The Tanchara Community in Ghana

1. Context

The Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development (CIKOD) is a Ghanaian NGO that employs an "endogenous development" strategy to support communities to design the course of their own efforts to improve their lives.[76] In 2003, CIKOD began working in the community of Tanchara, in the northwest of Ghana.[77] The Tanchara community is composed of roughly 3,800 people and is governed by an intricate traditional governance structure that includes a male Divisional Chief, the *Pognaa* who is the female counterpart to the Chief, and the *Tingan dem,* or group of elders who provide spiritual leadership. Tanchara's ecosystem is dry savannah, which is characterized by low rainfall and poor soil fertility. The people of Tanchara, who are of the Dagara tribe, make their livelihoods primarily through agriculture, including fruit and nut trees. There are eight local sacred sites, including various sacred groves, which have an abundance of medicinal plants and continue to be respected and conserved by the community. [78]

The story of how the community of Tanchara used traditional rituals and taboos to stop both an Australian mining company and local Ghanaian miners from prospecting for gold near one of their sacred sites is striking for its stunning effectiveness. While CIKOD, as a modern NGO, supported the community to use sophisticated legal strategies, global advocacy, and bureaucratic manoeuvring to obstruct the mining operation, it was the elders' ritual that had the most dramatic and immediate impact: from the day they publicly declared the ancestors' curse, there has been no gold mining within Tanchara's territory. Successfully defeating the mining company then opened up space for the community to revive traditional farming practices and find and propagate ancestral seed varieties.

2. Dagara Cosmology

Despite the strong influence of Christianity in Ghana, the Dagara have managed to hold onto much of their traditional cosmology. While they have specific sacred sites, they consider the whole earth to be sacred, and their relationship with land is at the centre of their cosmology. Bernard Guri, the Executive Director and founder of CIKOD, explained the importance of land and the centrality of land-honouring rituals:

> For my people, the Dagara people, land and man are in a very intrinsic relationship. We are believed to come from the sky and from the earth…. So in my tribe, everything for us begins with land and ends with land…. If you want to swear, you swear by the soil: you pick up the soil in your hands and swear by it. It is the mysterious way you can swear. …[And when you die] you don't get buried in a coffin, you have to go back naked, the way you came…Land is part of humanity, and all that we do; our farming practices all start with ceremonies, because the land has its own spirits, and you have to communicate with the land through those spirits. The land feeds us, it gives us food, and water, and all our needs; everything we need comes from the land. And so therefore we have a responsibility to honour land, and we have certain rituals [to do so]… Every year there are ceremonies we do to honour the land. Some are done in the rivers, as the rivers are part of land; some are done for trees, some are done on hills and mountains - all of those are part of the land, and man has to show respect. We have to thank the land by doing these rituals.

[76] Endogenous development " describes development efforts that initiate from within communities, and are designed, led, and controlled by community members, drawing on their own concepts of 'development.' Endogenously-driven community development leverages the community's own strengths, desires, visions and plans for its future, aligned with its own specific cultural, spiritual, and social traditions.

[77] Bern Guri, the Executive Director of CIKOD, explained that he began working in Tanchara, his home community, as the place to test out the radical ideas he'd come to as an agricultural extension officer: "I realized that the extension services I was offering were not right: these people had been living according to their own ways for a very long time. I realized I needed to learn from my own people – how did they survive until today? What were the good things? I started in my own village, because I knew that if I went to some new place, no one would believe me. So when I started I went there, to try to understand my people's own understanding of life."

[78] Guri Yangmaadome, Bernard, Banuoko Faabelangne, Daniel, Kanchebe Derbile, Emmanuel, Hiemstra, Wim and Verschuuren, Bas (2012), "Sacred groves versus gold mines: biocultural community protocols in Ghana" in *Biodiversity and culture: exploring community protocols, rights and consent (*PLA 65).

Indeed, the spiritual hierarchy in any Ghanaian Dagara village is based around honouring the land: the highest spiritual leader in every Dagara community is the "*Tingansob,"* or "Earth Priest." A highly respected elder in the community of Tanchara named Zingyere, who has since passed away, described the relationship between the Dagara and their land in this manner:

> At the beginning, God created the skies and clouds as a male. He then created the land as female (*Tengan*) and allowed the two to start a relationship. The thunder rolled and sent down rain and lightning onto earth: out of this intercourse, air, animals, plants, seeds (for life), rivers, mountains and all that we see today emerged and began to thrive….Land in *Dagara* culture remains the most sacred of all things because it is the embodiment of God's creation. God gave humans the responsibility to manage *Tengan* as resource for agriculture. Even after death, humans still have the responsibility to ensure the sustainable use of these resources. The ancestors, as part of this responsibility, therefore appointed the *Tengan dem*[79] to watch over these natural resources and to give rules to guide their use.[80]

The Dagara's sacred sites are those places where their ancestors first settled; the Dagara believe that their ancestors remain in these places, where they must be honoured and respected. Guri explained how: "The trees represent the ancestors, so if you cut any tree, you are cutting an ancestral spirit. It is the same for the mountains and the rivers: they are the original sites of the ancestors. And we believe that our ancestors never die; they die, but their spirits are still there, and we can go to them for knowledge. Those sites are the sites of the spirits."

However, modernity, colonization, western education, Christianity, and the global markets have eroded the strength and depth to which Ghanaians – including the Dagara – ascribe to their ancestral cosmology. Guri explained how:

> Despite exposure to western engagement, western religions and all of these influences, people in Ghana are very attached to their culture…The interesting thing is that for [us] we are simultaneously 100% Christian and 100% traditional…We live a dual life, between the western ways and our own traditions…But there is a huge force that is pulling us away – call it modernization – and religion plays a strong role in it. There are so many churches, and most of them focus on distracting you away from your own culture and knowledge system, saying if you are Christian, you have to move away from your culture.

Such dualism is thrown into stark relief when gold is found and people must choose between the promise of financial prosperity and honouring traditional beliefs that require protecting the sanctity of the land.

3. The Tanchara Community and Azumah Resources Limited

In 2004, the Ghanaian government granted the right to prospect for gold in Tanchara to an Australian mining company called *Azumah Resources Limited*. Although both international and Ghanaian law require that communities must be consulted and give their "free, prior, informed consent"[81] before a mining license can be granted within their territories, the community of Tanchara was not consulted, and were not even aware until 2006 that their lands would soon be mined. Indeed, they first became cognizant of the impending mining through a District Assembly newsletter describing the concession, and when community members noticed foreigners coming into their community and marking trees with red ribbons. These initial incursions soon brought an influx of informal Ghanaian miners, who, alerted to the presence of gold by tracking foreign mining concessions, raced to enter Tanchara's territory to mine what they

[79] The *Tengan dem* are a group of elders responsible for interfacing between the ancestors and the people.
[80] Birgit Boogaard, David Ludwig, Bernard Yangmaadome Guri, and Daniel Banuoku; African spirituality and agricultural development: Towards more respectful relations between humans and environments. (Publication pending.)
[81] The right to Free, Prior informed Consent is protected in the International Labor Organization Convention 169 and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

could before Azumah's operations began.

The influx of these illegal miners into the area immediately resulted in water pollution, partial destruction of some of the community's sacred groves, and the creation of large, uncovered pits. Guri described how:

> We learned there was an Australian company who had been given a license to explore gold mining in the area. When they came in, the illegal miners followed them, thinking, "These guys have technology!" [The illegal miners] came in and they dug up big trenches and started digging up the area, finding gold. So we thought, "What does this mean for us as a people?"…So we went into an analysis of the negative effects of this. We looked at the impacts, and the elders said, "No, we don't want mining to happen," and then the big trouble began. Because there were [local] businessmen who knew the value of gold, and who were in for the mine. So when the traditional elders said "no," a conflict came up.

However, while the elders were very much against it – and immediately issued a formal statement demanding that government "safeguard their sacred groves and sites from both legal and illegal mining" – the community's youth, less influenced by Dagara cosmology and seeking jobs and financial income, were very much in favour of the mining venture. A community conflict immediately arose.

CIKOD, being an NGO, immediately set about supporting the community to: understand the legal aspects of Azumah's mining license; learn their rights under all relevant national and international laws; understand the potential health impacts of industrial gold mining; and discuss the prospective mining operation as a community and resolve their internal conflicts. As part of this effort, CIKOD brought community members to other regions of Ghana to see the impacts of gold mining in similar villages. CIKOD also helped the community to challenge Azumah's poorly-done Environmental Impact Assessment. Eventually, the community's demands for proper consultation meetings were granted. During these consultation meetings with Azumah, and in many meetings with government officials, the community consistently voiced their opposition to gold mining in the region. In addition to these efforts, Guri described how CIKOD and the Tanchara leaders also:

> …organized advocacy against the Australian gold mining company: we went on the internet, and targeted their staff in Ghana to come and listen to us tell them about why we don't want gold mining. We decided that we had to understand international politics, and that if we got the stakeholders in Australia informed about what had happened in our community, it would affect the company. So we wrote a letter to the head of Azuma Resources in Australia to invite him to our village to see our problems. He asked his country rep to come to the meeting, and once the country rep came and saw the mood of the people, he sent a letter to the headquarters, advising: "You should move away to other villages who will be less against our activities."

Indeed, as a result of Tanchara's persistent efforts over the course of seven years, Azumah withdrew from the community in 2013 and has not returned since.

4. Using Dagara spiritual practices to protect against mining

The narrative above is the official story, one that CIKOD tells at conferences and in published articles.[82] However, if you ask both CIKOD staff and Tanchara community members, about how they defeated Azumah's proposed mining venture, they tell a strikingly different story. Guri described how the community resolved its internal conflict about the gold mining:

> It was quite a debate – because the youth had gone to the city and thought: "This is an easy way to make money, let's go for it!" But the leaders stood up and said, "It is not about money, it's about the life of the youth, for the future generations, and about *Tengan* – Mother Earth, God."

[82] See e.g. https://namati.org/news-stories/cikod-case-study/

> Anything done to desecrate the earth is desecrating God, and in their responsibility as elders, they had to protect Mother Earth. They saw that anything with digging up and damaging the land was damaging *Tengan*. So the elders just went and did their own consultation with the ancestors, and the ancestors said, "No, we don't want anybody meddling with our lands." So the elders came out and made this pronouncement that the whole community, the government, local people, miners, *nobody* is going to talk about mining the land; there will be no discussion of mining of the land, and if you do that, you are cursed, and the gods of the land will strike you. The elders said, "The earth is sacred, and no one can dig it, and anyone who comes to dig it, they will be cursed." This was the swearing of the traditional priests.[83]
>
> Then everyone felt something between fear and respect. Some of the educated youth were saying, "This is Satanism, we should not mind about it," but no one dared to break the rule. People were grumbling, insulting the leaders for making that decision – but no one dared to break that rule. And this information got to the illegal miners – small-scale minors from other places in Ghana – and all of them know the wrath of Tengan. So when they all heard that the elders had sworn on Tengan, they all packed their things and left, until today!
>
> In Ghana, cursing is a very serious thing, and people still use it. And although we are Christians or Muslims, we still revere – and fear – traditional ways. We take cursing very seriously. In the formal law, if you break the law, [you know the consequences]. In this one, no one knows the consequences. You might dig a mining hole and never come out. No one knows what will happen to you – so nobody is going to go there.

Because Guri and the other CIKOD staff were not part of the spiritual leadership of Tanchara, the mechanisms and rituals associated with the curse were shielded from them as well as from the wider community. Guri explained the mystery surrounding the process:

> I myself don't know how they decided and made the curse – the elders went and consulted the ancestors. The ancestors died hundreds of years ago, but they still have symbols representing them, and the elders still go to consult them… and the ancestors actually speak to them and give their instructions what to do. So the elders came out with the instructions from the ancestors – an even [the elders] can't change them. They just came out and announced to us the ancestors' instructions. They got someone to write on a piece of paper saying that it was a curse for anyone to even discuss issues of land. They sent it to me – and that piece of paper [is with] the government in Accra, even saying, "No one is even talking about mining in Tanchara." So that has saved the land until now.

5. Providing alternatives to gold mining

The victory over the gold mining was complex, however: although the ancestors and elders were satisfied, the village lost a significant opportunity for paid employment, and the community's youth felt unheard and overruled. Guri described how, "When we said, 'Don't mine your land' the question the younger people were asking was 'What is the alternative?' Because it is true, there is poverty in that village – it is dry, in a savannah ecological zone. You can't grow anything, and the young guys have no source of income." In response, CIKOD supported the community to revive their traditional farming methods, honed over millennia to be best suited to the local ecosystem:

> We have been supporting them to do ecological farming – looking at our traditional farming…[Dagara] farm food crops together with trees, and the trees increase the moisture content of the soil. The modern people came and said, "Cut all the trees, apply fertilizers and

[83] In the words of Zingyere, one of the elders involved: "In 2011 the…community was invaded by illegal miners,'*galamsey'*. The miners took over portions of land and started mining for gold against the will of the people. The *Tengan sob,* on realizing that miners would not heed to the pleas of the people to stop the practice, called all the *Tegan dem* together and put a curse that anybody engaging in mining in the village be struck by *Tengan*. The miners, out of fear of the wrath of *Tengan* packed their machines and left and have not returned up to date." (Boogaard et al., publication pending)

> pesticides!" So we have been telling them, "Go back to the traditional ways, and… compost the manure from the cows, compost all of it and send it back to the soil, which will improve the soil and improve the yields."…We trained them to identify young tree seedlings that are just sprouting up. The government provides all these young saplings that require a lot of care and don't make it after you plant them, but in this strategy, you simply *don't weed* the tree seedlings you find growing in your fields, you just let them grow naturally. Then you don't need to give them natural protection, they just grow. So now the trees are growing, and the vegetation has improved, and people have more access to wood for fuel and access to the leaves to improve the soil. The water table is rising – you cannot measure it, but water is now not an issue in that village. When we drill bore holes, there is always water, we always find it. You can relate it to the trees growing again – the tree cover helps to pull the water.

For the Dagara, their traditional farming is a spiritual agro-ecology, based on absolute respect for the ancestors, soil, seeds, and crops. As explained by Guri:

> In our own traditional farming, farming is not just about going and planting a seed and whatever. There is a lot of spirituality that must go on if a seed is going to germinate and grow and provide food. There is ritual that goes along with it. For a seed to thrive you need to take care of those needs as well…. In my community, before we do a planting, before you start a whole new farm, you go and observe. You might find a stick or a stone, and you gather soil into a mound. You leave, and when you come back you find something there before you start farming. There must be a ritual for the soil, and for the seed, and everything must be done before the farming starts….[Then], when you harvest, the first harvest goes to the spirits, with ceremony. You do some ceremony across the maize, and across the different crops we harvest; they all have different ceremonies that we do to honour the gods that have helped you to reap that harvest. That ancestral support is very important for us and has to be honoured.

CIKOD has been working with the Tanchara community to champion these strategies. Unfortunately, however successful they are, Guri noted frankly that "these farming techniques are not enough to keep the youth in the villages. So although this is a very interesting thing that is going on, it has not stopped the drift of the youth to the cities."

To further support a return to their indigenous farming practices, CIKOD also devised an ingenious strategy to help the Tanchara community recover their ancestral seeds:

> Our seeds had been lost because the government policy was to introduce "improved varieties" which reduced the seeds the farmers had access to only about five kinds of seeds. So we did a kind of a festival and invited all farmers – like a competition – and said, "The one who can bring the widest variety of seeds will get a prize." You should have *seen* the women – they thought no one cared about their old seeds! We went around the different villages and did this festival [in each village] – and from that we were able to retrieve the local seeds that were getting extinct. The women gave the local names of each seed, and told us about how to cook them, some for food, some for medicines, some for spiritual uses - and through this process, we got all of them back.

For Guri, the seed recovery efforts were not just about food security and food sovereignty for his community, but about making clear the links between farming methods, seeds, and the sacredness of the earth:

> Most people just talk about seeds and technology –and they leave out the spirituality aspects. For us, food is not just for eating, its also spiritual – and most of the crops are not just for food, but for doing some spiritual rituals…. We see food in two parts: food that we eat to nourish our bodies, and food for spiritual nourishment. You acknowledge the natural side of the food *and* the spiritual side. [For example] there are many varieties of sorghum – but there is a traditional variety…they use the head of that sorghum to do certain death rituals – so you can't have a funeral without it; you need it to do the rituals relating to death. So if you go to a funeral and you look closely, you

> always find a head of that sorghum is there. For us it is part of our wellbeing – it is not just eating food….The spiritual is equally as important as the material and the social – so if you leave out the spiritual, you leave out a core human need. The food sovereignty we are promoting needs to include spirituality.
>
> When you are doing the harvest season, there are some crops you can't just get and start eating – you have to go and do a ritual. For example, sorghum – you don't even *touch it* until you perform that ritual. It's a way of honouring the ancestors: the first of the crop must go to the ancestors. You take it to the ancestors – it is very symbolic – to feed the ancestors first. You take the first harvest and perform the rituals to honour and recognize, nourish the ancestors. And *only after that* are you then permitted to nourish yourself. You must go and call their names, and present it to them. You just evoke them, with a calabash and water, and you pour it onto Mother Earth, and we call them by their names, and recount our issues and challenges. There is a way of getting them to respond…The *Tingansob* is the one who can transmit back the information from the ancestors.

To ensure that the Dagara's seeds never again come to close to extinction, CIKOD has been collecting seeds and is constructing a local seed bank, with the plan of making the wide range of traditional seed varieties openly available to anyone in the region who would like to grow them. They are also planning to hold annual food fairs that celebrate their traditional foods.

6. Impacts

In Tanchara, the ecological impacts of stopping the mining, working to rejuvenate traditional Dagara farming methods, and recovering their ancestral seeds have been significant. First, had Azumah's mining operation gone ahead, it would have desecrated the forest in the area of the mining concession and disturbed one of the community's eight sacred sites. Second, the community has experienced a degree of greater prosperity – not in financial terms, but as measured by food security and a reduction in seasonal hunger. Guri noted that the women of Tanchara were particularly delighted by the revival of their traditional farming strategies and the recovery of their ancestral seeds: paired with new local boreholes that CIKOD raised funding to drill, making access to water easier in the dry seasons, the women are now seeing higher agricultural yields. As a result, local women in Tanchara have reported increased agricultural yields, ensuring their families are well-fed and transitioning them from subsistence agriculture to selling excess produce in local markets.

However, not everyone in the community has been pleased. As described above, the young men in the village are uninterested in farming, have no access to paying employment, and feel there is no future for them in the village. As a result, each year they move in record numbers to local cities and to Accra, looking for jobs. Moreover, those villagers keen on mining the gold underneath them have persevered in their efforts to evade or "undo" the ancestors' curse. A new chief of Tanchara, who is a young businessman, has been pushing to open one of the community's sacred sites to mining, as it has been found to have significant gold deposits. This chief went so far as to petition the Ghanaian government's Commission on Land to open the land for mining. However, Guri recounted how such efforts were futile as long as the curse remained in place:

> He convened some elders, but then the rest of the elders came to my home and reaffirmed their refusal to be part of it. They said, "No." The real elders were there, and so the young chief had to go back home; it didn't happen, and he has not been able to get that permit from the government. This same chief has not given up – he is still mobilizing the elders to listen to him. But as long as that curse is there, you can never break it. The young chief would need to get the elders to remove the curse, but the elders who took that decision are sure. You can get all the police and power behind you, but you will not change that curse. Nobody would dare.

However, the challenge may never fully recede: in Ghana, as in almost all nations, the state owns all sub-soil rights. As such, if the government chooses to begin mining in Tanchara, the community has little recourse to stop them. Furthermore, many of the elders of Tanchara who still hold deep knowledge of

their spiritual traditions are dying. Guri described how:

> The elders are all dying out. All the people I was looking up to, a lot of them have died – there are just a few who are still left. And no one is listening to them – so the elders are getting very demoralized, and that is impacting them: that demoralization is hastening their deaths. So very soon we will be losing the institutional memory of the elders. So that's the most urgent issue we have: how to learn from the elders that are still here, and how to encourage the younger men to take over from them?

7. Intergenerational transfer of indigenous knowledge

To address this challenge, CIKOD is hoping to create an "intergenerational learning centre" as a place where youth and elders can interact; where elders can share their traditional knowledge and youth can teach elders how to use modern technologies:

> The children are all going to westernized schools, where no traditional songs are sung. They still use a colonized curricula – developed in Britain!….I was very much involved in this in the past, trying to get the Minster of Education to indigenize our curricula. I fought and fought and fought at the national level; they all agree in theory, but no one wants to send their children to a place were they are learning about indigenous things. They all want to send them to schools in the English traditions. We are now *colonizing ourselves* – and that is more dangerous, because you can't *blame* anyone: if you get a little bit of money, you want to send your child to an international school…So it is really a challenge. It's a serious problem: the youth are losing hope in the village. We need to understand the young people and provide alternatives. Let them appreciate how these traditional things are useful for their life…At the least, let's see how we can have alternative extracurricular programs in our schools to teach them these things.

However, Guri points to some avenues of hope: in Tanchara, one of the youth who got very involved in the campaign against Azumah created a theatre group for youth, which is now in its fifth year, and whose repertoire now includes performances that address issues like protecting sacred groves, saving traditional seed varieties, as well as the challenges and frustrations of young people living in rural villages where elders make all the key decisions.

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The story of Tanchara it illustrates the power, or perceived power, of the more-than-human world: the curse *worked*. The moment the elders proclaimed the ancestors' curse, the young illegal miners, although they grumbled about it and called it "satanic," left in haste and never again mined the land. Despite decades of colonial oppression and centuries of Christian missionaries, the Dagara Peoples' spiritual connections and beliefs remain vibrantly intact: at the first inkling of a threat to their lands, the elders could discuss the mining with their ancestors, receive a verdict, and take immediate, effective action – which the youth scrupulously obeyed.

Even the young chief does not dare mine unless the curse is lifted; rather than simply launching a small-scale mining operation, he is expending significant energy pestering the elders to seek the ancestor's permission. In this community, the link between the human world and the spirit world has remained strong and immediate, and community respect for that connection is strong as well. Of particular interest, then, is why communities across Ghana, where supernatural forces retain significant social power across various tribal groups, do not *all* simply stop illegal mining and logging with similar curses. Viewed in this light, it becomes clear that not all leaders are anti-mining, and rather may be easily persuaded to betray their spiritual cosmologies in exchange for financial gain. As such, this story is also a story of a rare group of high integrity elders, led by a strong NGO, who are committed above all else to honouring and respecting their ancestors and fiercely protecting their lands, waters, and sacred sites.

G. Reviving the Sacred Fire Ceremonies of Central Asia

1. Context

The states of modern Central Asia were subject to direct control from Russia for more than a century and a half. Starting in the eighteen century, Russian oligarchs began what would become a long campaign to subordinate the Indigenous Peoples of what was then Russia (and is today much of Central Asia). This process accelerated under Stalin, then continued throughout the Soviet regime: during the more than seventy years of enforced state atheism, both mainstream religions and indigenous mysticism were brutally repressed, shamanic practices were outlawed, and thousands of indigenous shamans were killed or sent to the Gulag's forced labour camps, their belongings burned or confiscated by soviet museums.[84] Nomadic herders were forced into sedentary, collective farms, and honouring of the region's ancient burial grounds and sacred natural sites was disrupted for 70 years.

This case study tells of how a handful of activists and spiritual practitioners revived the practice of holding fire ceremonies in parts of Central Asia where they had been suppressed for decades. Importantly, although the fire ceremonies were revived for their own sake, the ceremonies ended up being essential to the success of *legal* efforts to stop mining, pipeline construction and other state-sponsored efforts that would have desecrated sacred sites across the region. These courageous activists and spiritual leaders then leveraged the energy generated by the fire ceremonies to create a network of regional parks that safeguard sacred natural sites; to run cultural centres that teach traditional knowledge and ceremony to the next generation; to protect endangered snow leopards; to revive ceremonies within their family's clan; to write textbooks that teach about indigenous Altai knowledge; and to catalogue and restore more than 1,200 sacred sites across Kyrgyzstan, linking their guardians into a supportive network. Cumulatively, these efforts are opening up the space for a slowly-growing revival of traditional ways of honouring ancestors and sacred lands.

2. Restoring sacred sites and reviving fire ceremonies

In the 1990's, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the ensuing independence of the Central Asian republics, intellectuals, academics, and activists throughout the region began a revival of traditional practices that had been suppressed for decades. Describing this time, Mikhail Shishin, a historian at Altai State Technical University expressed how, "Socialist culture dominated Altai. As soon as the pressure of party beliefs died away the culture began to reawaken. Its roots were still alive. Just like how a plant pushes up from the asphalt, I saw with my own eyes how the culture began to grow."[85]

As explained by a Buryat elder living in present-day Russia who spoke on condition of anonymity, the motivation was both political and intensely personal:

> When we threw out the socialist system, we thought: "Wow, we can finally build a just society and value the heritage and identity of each particular tribe, each particular indigenous group!"…We decided to work on the revitalization of culture, and traditional education for the Buryat People…and it became so obvious that our relationships as people with our environment and our world views were central to this: we inherited them, but we lost them during the Soviet times, and then with the market economy that poured into our country. So we needed to restore that – and we needed to start thinking of our knowledge as a body of knowledge…and sacred sites embody this knowledge, this memory, our communication with the divine, the identity of our people. So we thought, "Okay, lets start with the protection of sacred sites because it is the best education for Indigenous Peoples."

[84] https://www.equalrightstrust.org/sites/default/files/ertdocs/Legacies%20of%20Division.pdf, https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HistoryMemory_Implications_for_Pluralism_in_Kyrgyztan_the_the_Ferghana_Valley_Global_Centre_for_Pluralism.pdf

[85] Transcript of "Pilgrims and Tourists" documentary, made by toby McLeod, available at: https://standingonsacredground.org/transcripts

Around this time, an anthropologist in Kyrgyzstan named Gulnara Aitpaeva became deeply interested in sacred sites, and gave up her professorship to found an organization, the *Aigine Cultural Research Centre* (ACRC),[86] that works full time on researching and restoring Kyrgyz sacred sites; through their work, hundreds of sacred sites across Kyrgyzstan have been acknowledged. However, for Aitpaeva, cataloguing and restoring the *physical* aspects of the sacred sites was not enough: it was also necessary to find and reinstate the guardians of the sacred sites, and to begin holding ceremonies at these sites. The Buryat elder explained how, in 2007, the vision for the revival of the Kyrgyz ancestral fire ceremonies arose:

> [A member of our group] had the idea that the ancient fire ceremonies should be restored and was able to articulate it. There was a spiritual leader from the United States, Apela Colorado; this vision also came to her. Apela met Gulnara, who was also in search of herself and her identity; they all shared their visions, and it became obvious that the time was right to organize the first fire ceremony.

The group decided that the first fire ceremony would be held in Kyrgyzstan, and, to create solidarity and support, in sacred sites across the world. Spiritual leaders from many countries were invited to Kyrgyzstan to support the fires in person. The Buryat elder described how:

> We did the first ceremony in different parts of the world simultaneously, as well as in Kyrgyzstan, where it was totally forgotten. It never disappeared in the Altai, in Russia. [Despite the external] oppression, we still kept the fire in our hearths, we fed the fire, but in Kyrgyzstan everything was new for them…The fire ceremony was lost in Kyrgyzstan because of Islam: the people who practiced it were accused of worshipping devils, but the Kyrgyzstani people are nomadic people, they have very deep nomadic roots, and their fire ceremony is the start of many official things for them. We supported the revival of this Fire Ceremony, joined with people from across the Altai region, as well as people from Ethiopia, Mongolia, Kenya, Mexico, Korea, and Mayan communities from Guatemala – it was a really important process of revival.

However, because fire ceremonies had not been held openly for generations, the Kyrgyz group had to confront gaps in their knowledge of how to hold the ceremony. The Buryat elder explained that:

> We held the first fire on 22 March, 2008. It was very small, and then even how to *light* the fire was a problem: it is a very patriarchal society, because of Islam and everything, and no one knew who should ignite the fire, men or women. In the Buryat/Mongolian language, the name for a shamaness is *Odigon Udagan*, which means literally "The keeper of the fire." *Ot* means "spark" or "fire." *Altain Ot* is the fire itself in the Kyrgyz language. *Uluu Ot* means "great Fire" in Kyrgyz. So [we found a shamaness, and] this shamaness was not afraid, and it she ignited the fire, and the men helped, and they did prayers and it was good.
>
> The people who [were invited to] the first fire ceremonies were not new-agers, not doing it for their own egos, but real spiritual leaders in their own communities and on their own lands, which is why they were invited, and why they came and helped. And the people who were ready to listen came. Because for example, even small details were totally forgotten and were done in wrong ways, but the Kenyans told how it is done in their culture, and it was wonderful for us to hear that; we accepted their advice gratefully, and next time we did it in a different way….It felt right; the right people congregated around the idea, which is why it is still alive, and moving and growing – if we did something wrong, it would not be still going.

[86] ACRC's activities are directed at preserving, developing, and integrating traditional knowledge into contemporary life, aiming to incorporate the positive potential of traditional wisdom in decision making at all levels of public and political life. Its main projects are the systematic study of sacred sites and pilgrimage practice in Kyrgyzstan; research into and revival of the master-apprentice system in traditional music; protection and development of Kyrgyz epic heritage; and preservation of traditional knowledge and practices. ACRC's data on more than a thousand sacred sites has been published in ten books in Kyrgyz, Russian, and English, and it completed the first full video compilation of the *Manas, Semetei, Seitek* epic trilogy. https://www.cedarnetwork.org/who-we-are/fellows-network/cedar-fellows-stories/fellows-stories-gulnara-aitpaeva-2/

Indeed, Cholponai **Usubalieva-Grishuk**, who works for ACRC, explained that the invited spiritual leaders from around the world "were doing their own [fire] ceremonies throughout the day, showing [us] what they do, how they do it, what offerings they give to the spirits, etc. Then one big fire was done by all the practitioners at once [on Lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan]." The first fire ceremony was also informed and supported by spiritual practitioners from the Altai, who had held ceremonies throughout the Soviet era.

After the success of the first fire ceremony in 2008, the group of organizers grew, and the regional fire ceremony became an annual event. The Buryat elder explained how the Fire Ceremonies were strategically moved around to support campaigns to protect sacred sites from mining and large-scale infrastructure projects:

> The revival of the sacred fire ceremony was very purposeful, not just for people to get together and pray together, but because it was a real appeal to their own cultural and spiritual roots and nomadic way of life…It became really a movement, not only in Kyrgyzstan, but around the [region]. After three fire ceremonies in Kyrgyzstan…in 2010 the fire ceremony came to Altai to stop the gas pipelines: there was a plan to put a pipeline to China directly though a sacred site there...For three years the fire was in the Altai, and then it moved to the Mongolian part of the Altai….to ensure the protection of the Mongolian part of the Altai, the sacred cradle of humanity. We believe that all Eurasian people come from the Altai, so we needed international protection mechanisms… we tried hard to create a transboundary legal recognition [between Russia, Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan] based on natural and cultural properties. [As we held the ceremonies], we worked to get it recognized as a World Heritage Site...And then, for two years the fire ceremony went to the eastern part of Mongolia where the majority of the population are Buryats, and the ceremonies there were done at the birth place of Genghis Khan – we worship him as the unifier of humanity. From this point of view, the fire was a unifying force again. Then, last year was the first time the fire ceremony finally came to Lake Baikal, where it was done on the sacred site of Olkhon Island.

3. Impacts of the Fire Ceremonies

The fire ceremonies and anti-pipeline activism facilitated the close collaboration of similarly-minded activists across Central Asia. Indeed, the fire ceremonies became a key component of activists' efforts to stop a natural gas pipeline that Russia's state energy company, Gazprom, planned to build across the Altai's fragile tundra ecosystem, directly through the Ukok Plateau, a UNESCO World Heritage Site encompassing the headwaters of vast rivers, significant sacred sites and ancient burial kurgans, and the habitat of endangered snow leopards. Galina Angarova, a member of Buryat People who was at the time heading the NGO Pacific Environment's contribution to that campaign, described how, as activists across the region collaborated to block the pipeline's construction, their strategies were deeply informed by the fire ceremonies:

> We had the official approval of the local shamans to work with people on these issues. On the outside what we were doing was fighting the pipeline, but any physical expression has a deep root in the spiritual realm…The spiritual practices really informed us what to do next in our legal strategy…We did private fire ceremonies with Danil. We devised multi-layered strategies: passports and legislation to protect the sacred natural sites; a protected area approach, working directly with existing protected areas and creating new protected areas; working with the local people on mapping, doing global campaigns to block IPOs; so much work, constantly. But the heart of it was the ceremony – the way Danil described it was, "Galina, we are working in a different realm to stop this pipeline"…When you get to that source of deeper knowledge, you just *know*. You tap into resources that are not usually available to you, and then they inform your course of action.

Summarizing the impacts of these first Fire Ceremonies, the Buryat elder recounted how "we have seen very tangible results in the places where the fire ceremony has been brought...The fire ceremony has had

a very direct impact on the protection of the snow leopards and the stopping of the pipeline." In 2013 Gazcom first redirected the pipeline, then, in 2015, indefinitely postponed its construction.[87]

Usubalieva-Grishuk recounted how the fire ceremony impacted the snow leopard conservation work: "There was a person who was involved in the conservation of the snow leopards, and that person came to the Fire Ceremony, and wished for the conservation of snow leopards, and his conservation work evolved from nothing into making a whole park to conserve the snow leopards' ecosystem!" She also noted the deeper psychological impacts of reviving traditional rituals upon people's sense of dignity:

> I believe that just the recognition of the practices and the people who hold these ceremonies – it gives them an inner pride, and an impulse to carry on with what they do. Because culturally, during the Soviet times, the people who were practicing their indigenous practices were considered not exactly savage, but uneducated, behind, lacking process. And if you talk to rural communities in Kyrgyzstan, they still feel inadequate. By showing them that these practices [are valued], and showing that there are other people in the world who have these practices - and that these practices define them as who they are: it gives them a sense of purpose, and [permission] to do what they are doing without being ashamed of it.

For Angarova, who has spent her adult life living in the United States, the fire ceremonies were a profound emotional homecoming. She described how:

> When I was in front of the fire I felt the fire spirit. It was an experience, unexplainable in words – we were sitting around the fire in ceremony, and all of a sudden I "got" what it was – I was one with it, I understood it… I got nourished. Though my lungs, that medicine of the land was coming to me: I tapped into a different realm of knowledge that I'd never had access to before. I finally felt like I was becoming who I am supposed to be.

4. Documenting and protecting sacred natural sites

Danil Mamyev, the spiritual practitioner, worked as a geologist for 20 years in Kazakhstan, but, after the fall of the Soviet Union, felt called to return to his birthplace, a traditional community in the Karakol Valley. Regionally, the Karakol Valley is believed to be the umbilicus that connects humans to the cosmos. As part of the effort to stop the pipeline and to protect the Karakol Valley from being developed, Mamyev spearheaded efforts to create what is now the 60,000 square hectare Uch Enmek Nature Park.[88] To manage the park, Mamyev created an advisory council of local residents, land users and landholders to collectively determine how the land is governed.[89]

When the fire ceremony moved to the Altai, it went first to the Uch Enmek Nature Park, more deeply linking the sacred mountain and the people living at its base into the growing network of people practicing their ancestral rituals.[90] Describing the Uch Enmek Nature Park, Mamyev said: "Until the late 1990's, people saw the Karakol Valley as a sacred landscape, but that was where it stopped – they didn't know how to connect with it. So we established this nature park in the valley. Many people opposed this effort – but now they get it, they understand that it allows us to protect and manage these lands ourselves."[91]

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[87] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altai_gas_pipeline

[88] The Park fully protects both the sacred peak at the back of the valley, as well as the valley's compete watershed and ecosystem. http://uchenmek.ru/territoriya-sotrudnichestva/

[89] The anti-pipeline activists also registered individual land plots across the proposed path of the pipeline to formalize their land rights. These landowners became the members of the Land Owners Council of the Karakol Valley, who then collectively signed papers asserting that they would not sell off their land for the pipeline.

[90] Similarly, in Tunka County in the Buryat Republic, in the 1990's the citizens of the county decided that their entire county should become a national park, a special protected territory. The Buryat elder explained: "They just decided this themselves. It is incredibly rich in mineral resources, so many now regret that they made this romantic decision, but its alive and still holding a very sacred place for the Buryatia. It is really interesting, there has been a lot of controversy there, but it's a precedent… Its not free from difficulties, but it's the people's decision and it still exists, which is amazing. [For the people involved in these efforts,] there is a sense of identity being strengthened, sense of self-worth strengthened, a sense of pride and dignity that they have made this decision for the sake of their own children and grandchildren." See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunkinsky_National_Park

[91] English translation by Jennifer Castner.

After establishing the Uch Enmek Nature Park, Mamyev and others went on to successfully campaign for a regional network of parks – Argut, Katun, and Chui-Oozy Parks – that together protect the sacred standing stones and petroglyphs located within their bounds. Mamyev and others across the Altai have also been working to post signs and educate tourists about how to conduct themselves at sacred natural sites. [92]

Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan, as the fire ceremonies were being revived, Aitpaeva and her team at the Aigine Cultural Research Centre were working tirelessly to catalogue more than 1,200 Kyrgyz sacred sites, as well as their origin stories, meanings, purposes, locations, and the various protocols and practices associated with them. ACRC also systemically researched pilgrimage routes across all of Kyrgyzstan. The team has now moved beyond research and is working to find the sacred sites' guardians and organize them into a network. Describing these guardians, **Usubalieva-Grishuk said:**

> Some of them, according to their stories, are the people who have been doing spiritual self-searching for a long time. Some had prophetic dreams that they have to go to a certain site and tend to it, and then that opens their inner spiritual powers of being a healer or a fortune teller. When a person has a spiritual calling, they all become sick at young ages. When they become sick, there is no medical cure for [their sickness]. Many indigenous healers or shamans recommend for those children to go on a pilgrimage to the sacred sites with a mentor or a shaman. Then there are certain people that have become sacred site guardians because they have healing capacities or can tell the future. And sometimes they are regular pilgrims who had been going to sacred site to ask for prosperity, health, etc. and they felt that if they look after the places they have come to love, they are better humans. In the last 5-7 years, the number of guardians has declined – some of them are passing away, and others are not stepping up, so there are less and less.

ACRC also advocates for the passage of national laws establishing legal protections for Kyrgyzstan's sacred sites. **Usubalieva-Grishuk explained how ACRC is working to** get "legal status for sacred sites because they are not legally recognized in this country…We want to show that the sacred sites, pilgrimages, and related practices are not only for animistic people, but a *range* of spiritual beliefs including Islam, and that these sites are our *cultural heritage*, not just religious places. They are *all* of our common heritage, and it is our obligation to protect them." However, no national law on sacred sites has yet been approved, as the Kyrgyz government is primarily Muslim, and Kyrgyz Islam views pilgrimage practices to sacred sites as in contradiction to the teachings of Islam.[93] Indeed, **Usubalieva-Grishuk** described how, despite the re-emergence of indigenous cosmology and practice in Kyrgyzstan: "People are now becoming very radicalized and Islamicized, so now again there is resistance to these sacred sites, and these practices are considered very bad and sinful by the radical groups, who are now even destroying sacred sites. So these past fifteen years have been a very difficult time."

5. Promoting on-going and intergenerational learning

To promote the carrying forward of traditional knowledge in the Altai, Mamyev wrote a set of textbooks for students on indigenous Altai culture, history and sciences, and is now working to teach Altai school teachers about their indigenous heritage, with the goal of these teachers passing on this knowledge in their classrooms. However, the popularity of the textbooks alarmed the Russian government, who removed them from the schools, and the young teachers have not universally embraced the traditional knowledge. Mamyev described how:

> The loss of our traditional knowledge stemmed from the Russian educational system, so if you teach children in western culture, they become western, and if you teach them in the traditional education system, they become traditional – *how* you teach them is *who* they become. So in the

[92] Such rules include: tying clean blue or white strips of cloth to trees (rather than unclean cloth or plastic); no partying or loud noises at freshwater springs and mountain passes; no desecration of petroglyph sites, etc. to teach respectful behavior as well.

[93] In the absence of a national laws that would protect the sacred natural sites, ACRC is working to get the sites registered in UNESCO's "Intangible Cultural Heritage"[ICH] list, and to inscribe them to the Kyrgyz National Inventory of sacred natural sites, which it must create as part of its formal adoption of the 2003 Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage.

> Karakol valley we are trying to develop an education system that teaches relationship to land as a living being… We would like all teachers – no matter their subject area – to be able to teach their subject through the lens of our traditional worldview. So when they are teaching physics, they are teaching it through that worldview and can talk about the unseen, the spirits of trees, etc….We started with the hypothesis that for people who were ethnically Altai, it would just click, that they would recognize this culture as theirs and just proceed, but not all teachers were able to recognize this knowledge….Some teachers have just left their traditional culture behind and are very modern; they were not willing to integrate traditional knowledge into their teachings.

Mamyev and his colleagues responded to these challenges by building a cultural centre and school, the *Tengri School of Spiritual Ecology*, where they run parallel educational programs that teach indigenous Altai cosmology and traditional knowledge. Ceremony is a core component of this education: Mamyev has come to understand ceremony as a primary way to help modern people reconnect to their ancestors. He explained how:

> In the Karakol Valley, we see though our culture that the land understands human language, understands behaviour, and seeks connection…We have concluded that even if the ancestral knowledge is lost, it still remains in the poles of the earth. It is not lost; ceremony is like plugging a flash drive memory stick into the earth: it is how humans can connect in sacred spaces and get back ancestral knowledge in a new way. It is not just energy, but information that you can connect to….Our ancestors showed their deep knowledge of science, physics, the alignment of the stars and the sun, and of stones and all the materials they used. They were educated to a high degree in their own way and that knowledge has the possibility of being carried forward in ceremony….
>
> We knew that we had to prepare *spaces* for teaching this traditional philosophy and immersing people in it – not just a classroom space but natural spaces where they can make these connections to the landscape. We received a grant to build a centre with classrooms and small hotel to be able to host people on site, which includes a ceremonial space – a hearth where we can make offerings, standing stones that have been carefully placed into the valley setting, and places for workshops on preparing traditional food and everyday items for our traditional life ways.

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Today, despite the growing popularity of conservative Islam, efforts to revive indigenous culture are gaining momentum throughout Central Asia. More than a decade of annual fire ceremonies around the region have given a kind of "permission" to people who, for generations, had been afraid to practice their indigenous beliefs publically. The Buryat elder described how, as a result of the fire ceremonies:

> People started to understand that they themselves can do a lot, and that's very important in countries like Russia where all initiatives are suppressed and to step forward requires a lot of courage. Internally, it was such a powerful, powerful process, causing invisible but huge shifts in the attitudes and minds of these spiritual practitioners…who feel pressure from the state, from public opinion, from the Islamic leaders. But now they cannot and will not stop holding these fires, because the ceremonies are *required* by their ancestors. And now there is a network of people making these fire ceremonies who *don't even know* about the origin of our first fire ceremony in 2008! People are taking care of the sacred sites, which involves aspects of the fire ceremony; the format they use now includes elements of the fire ceremony we revived – and they continue to do the spiritual work to connect to their sacred sites…The ceremony was very important for the local people, especially the young people: this ceremony empowered them.

One example of this is how, Angarova, now the Executive Director of Cultural Survival, recently teamed up with her elderly mother to galvanize their clan, part of the Ekhirit nation of the Buryat People, to hold one of their traditional ceremonies. Speaking of the power of this experience for her family, Angarova said:

> In the 20th century, when the communists came to our land and killed over a thousand shamans, a lot of shamans went into hiding, and we really thought it was over…. For many years we were not allowed to practice. We were in hiding. We were punished for even speaking our language. Meanwhile, the young people wanted to live in the city. It can be broken so quickly. But we are restoring it now…When you bring the ceremonies back, it repairs the relationship to the land. Two years ago, my mom and I did that first ceremony. It took us five months to get ready for that ceremony. We made a family tree of the whole clan, and then spent three months calling people to invite them. Then we got together and hired a filmmaker, and he documented everything [for our community to have for ourselves] and we invited a shaman from a neighbouring community because we didn't have our own shaman at the time. He remembered the whole lineage, all our ancestors. We dedicated all of our prayers to those ancestors.
>
> …The fire ceremony in my clan is all about the ancestors, the fire is a medium for us to communicate with our ancestors – a very powerful medium, and the way we do it is to create the fire and burn the things that the ancestors are asking for us to offer. As an example, my mom burned a tobacco pipe, because she had a dream that one of the ancestors had an old pipe and needed a new one. We burn pieces of freshly butchered meat, we burn pieces of the best, freshest food, and we also share traditional beverages, including an alcoholic beverage made from fermented cows' milk. We believe in that physical representation: when it is burnt it goes into another realm and is given to our ancestors, and they are enjoying and celebrating it with us, communicating. They get really happy, you can see it and feel it…
>
> Then, the next year, it happened on its own: the clan organized themselves – they did it without my mom and I needing to be involved. And it went well! The first shaman showed up after two decades [of hiding her identity], and then a second woman showed up and also revealed herself as a shaman!… It is coming back, which tells me that people are going back to their roots. It comes in your blood, with your DNA. Even though we have lost a lot of the rituals and traditional ways of healing things, we are slowly recovering… People are rising, there is more awareness now: the seeds have been planted.

Twelve years later, the fire ceremonies are still taking place; this year, because of Covid-19, the fire ceremonies were small and dispersed, but timed to take place simultaneously. Describing the importance of ceremony, the Buryat elder said:

> For me, ceremony and ritual are not important for conservation, they ARE conservation…. [Ceremony] *is* conservation in its highest manifestation…We have every day spiritual work: every day routines to communicate with the waters, the lands the forests, the mountains. In the Mongolian and Buryat language, there is even a term that means "to sooth or pacify the spirits of the land," because the land is angry. They are working every day to pacify – *argadakh* – to sooth, calm down, pacify, bring joy to it. Our mission…is to bring joy back to the mother earth – to make Her joyful. Not us, but *Her*.

H. The Salween Peace Park

1. Context

The Karen People, which number five million, are a primarily agricultural indigenous group split mainly across southeastern Myanmar and Thailand. Led by the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen people of Myanmar were embroiled in a violent civil war with the Burmese government from 1949 until 2012, fighting for a semi-autonomous Karen state within a federal democratic union of Myanmar. For more than seven decades, the lands of the Karen in Myanmar have been a war zone: more than one hundred thousand Karen have fled their homes to live in refugee camps along the Thai border, while hundreds of thousands more were internally displaced within Myanmar. Because of the duration of the conflict, in some areas two generations of Karen have been born in refugee camps, far from their indigenous territories. In 2012, the government of Myanmar and the KNU signed a ceasefire agreement,[94] which has opened up the region to international businesses and large-scale infrastructure projects. While some refugees have begun returning home, many of them are returning to lands that look very different than when they left.[95]

This case study tells the story of how, together with the leaders of twenty six village track communities (each of which include 10-20 smaller villages within them) in the Salween River Valley, the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN),[96] a Karen NGO headquartered near the Thai-Burma border, created the 5,485 square kilometre Salween Peace Park. The Park aims to provide tenure security and self-governance authority to the communities, and to protect the valley from mining, logging, and large-scale investment projects. For the Karen, carving out this protected space is the necessary first step towards restoration of the full flourishing of their culture. Now, having established the Park and, in doing so, protected their lands and sacred natural sites, the communities are beginning to revive key aspects of their culture, including the sacred site-specific ceremonies and rituals they were not been able to perform during their years in the refugee camps.

2. Innovating a new model of community-created protected areas: Creation of the Salween Peace Park

The genesis of the Salween Peace Park came out of KESAN's work on Karen community forest stewardship in Mutraw District. Critically analysing the situation after the ceasefire was signed in 2012, KESAN staff and the local KNU leaders realized that they were working at too small a scale, and that the Karen communities they were supporting, protected by years of warfare from large-scale infrastructure development and corporate land grabs, would quickly be overwhelmed. Searching for a faster, large-scale way to protect community forests, they decided to target the Salween River Valley, as it was the only as-yet-undeveloped region of the Karen's territory.

To be able to work at that large a scale, KESAN turned to the Karen's indigenous governance system, the *Kaw*, and began holding meeting with Kaw leaders from across the valley.[97] According to Paul Sein Twa, the Executive Director of KESAN, at these meetings, "We wondered: 'How can our ancestral domains and territories continue to exist as we have from the past until now, and continue to exist in the future? How can we proactively respond to the external threats coming at us?' Those were the burning questions

[94] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16523691

[95] The UNHCR has facilitated and supported a voluntary return; however, based on those returnees' stories and experiences, the UNHCR is not encouraging the majority (who remain in the refugee camps) to follow suit, as the environment to which they will return to is not yet conducive to peaceful habitation. The major issue hindering the return is the severe lack of security due to the government Army's militarization.https://earthjournalism.net/stories/indigenous-karen-communities-in-myanmar-move-to-protect-rivers-forests, https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/myanmar-refugees-thai-camps-face-repatriation-challenges, https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2019/7/5d3822dc4/decades-thailand-myanmar-refugees-head-home.html

[96] https://kesan.asia/

[97] The Kaw is "a physical area and a Karen social institution for sustainable land governance, as well as a complex communal arrangement that integrates indigenous ecological knowledge, protected wildlife areas, rotational upland fields, taboos against hunting keystone species, and peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms." https://kesan.asia/salween-peace-park-initiative/

among the community leaders in these villages." The community leaders started meeting regularly, and inviting KNU leaders to these meetings. Meanwhile, KESAN staff were intently researching every possible legal avenue for creating a protected area. When they completed their research, they made presentations and brochures about the various conservation models, outlining the pros and cons of each model, and shared them with local communities living in the 26 village tracks. Eventually, KESAN presented the wide array of possible protective mechanisms to the leadership group, which, upon analysing the options, decided to *self-declare* the Salween Peace Park, establish it in their own Charter, and govern it according to Karen indigenous rules and protocols. Sein Twa described how:

> We looked at the idea of a national park, and we looked at the idea of protected areas, and the process for us would have been similar to the one established on the Thai side – they have a "Salween National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary" – and it is a strict state protected area, but we still have Karen communities living in those parks, and they suffer many restrictions on their traditional livelihoods from the Thai government. So we thought, "No, no, no, we cannot follow that park model!" So we studied the IUCN conservation systems, and [we made an effort to] learn from indigenous tribal parks in Australia, Canada and Latin America. Then we decided, "Okay, the country is emerging from conflict and engaging in a peace process, and the peace process is very fragile, so let's give hope to our people and well as offering a solution to the emerging peace process, and offering a solution to climate change and all this environmental destruction."

KESAN and the indigenous community leaders then took this proposal to the KNU, who ratified it during their 2015 Mutraw District Congress, giving KESAN and the communities the green light to begin creating the Salween Peace Park. Between May 2016 and December 2017, a 47-member Peace Park "interim committee" led a series of grassroots consultation meetings, involving 5,149 residents of the 26 village tracks that would be included in the future park. Over the course of 18 months of consultations with villagers and the Karen National Union (KNU), the Salween Peace Park Charter was drafted, then passed with the endorsement of 75% of the voting-age population.[98]

The Preamble to the Charter reads:

> "We, the Indigenous Karen people of Mutraw, recognizing our roots that transcend national boundaries; respecting the natural world, which has sustained our people for generations; honouring the memory of those who have struggled against all forms of injustice against the people and the Earth; In order to create and sustain a lasting peace process in our lands, protect and maintain the environmental integrity of the Salween River basin, preserve our unique cultural heritage, and further the self-determination of our people; so enact and establish…the Salween Peace Park."

As a component of their commitment to self-governance, the creators of the Park have not sought the government of Myanmar's formal recognition of the Peace Park. By declaring their lands to be an indigenous-created and indigenous-controlled protected area, the 26 village tracks and the KNU positioned the Peace Park in opposition to the government of Myanmar, which alone holds the legal power to create national parks, dictate how villages should be governed, and mandate how natural resources can be used and extracted. KESAN's website reflects this defiant attitude; it describes the genesis of Peace Park in this way:

> The new Myanmar government has promised to lead the country toward a devolved, federal democracy. The Karen are not waiting idly for this: the Salween Peace Park is federal democracy in action. It is indigenous self-determination and community protection of natural and cultural heritage in action….The Salween Peace Park is the embodiment of a vision that an alternative to top-down, militarized, destructive 'development' is possible.[99]

[98] https://www.newmandala.org/notes-from-the-salween-peace-park/
[99] https://kesan.asia/salween-peace-park-initiative/

After the adoption of the Charter, a key component of the Park's self-recognition was a large public celebration to publicly "declare" the Peace Park's establishment. As described by Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, who observed the declaration on behalf of the Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) Consortium:

> During the celebration of the declaration of the Salween Peace Park, they brought together 1,500 people, and had traditional music, exchanges of local seeds and agricultural products, and speeches. For me, what was very important was that *they publicly stated who and what they are, and who they will continue to be.* This is fundamental for self-strengthening – this self-awareness and self-recognition. Communities spend so much time asking for legal recognition of their own custodianship/ownership of land – the recognition by others of something that they *are*. But the first step must be *self-recognition*. And unless a community has that self-recognition, no other recognition matters. The community needs first to want to be a custodian, and because of that, to have external recognition of their governance role, and possibly (but not necessarily!) even to have the formal ownership of the land…*but self-recognition* is first fundamental for all outside recognition to be meaningful.

Today, the Salween Peace Park is led by an 11-member "Governing Committee" elected by the 106 members of the Park's General Assembly. The 106 members of the General Assembly include: 52 elected village representatives (one man and one woman from each of the 26 village tracks), 12 representatives of civil society, and 42 representatives from the KNU's local government offices. According to the Charter, the Governing Committee is tasked with: peace building, conflict resolution and reconciliation; refugee rehabilitation; management of the Park's lands and natural resources, including the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries, forest reserves, and community forests; land management and administration; and the preservation and revitalization of Karen cultural heritage. (Salween Peace Park Charter, Article 37). [100]

3. Revitalizing Karen traditional governance and culture to promote conservation

A central goal of establishing the Peace Park was to create an area where the Karen could govern their lands through their traditional Kaw system of governance, and according to traditional Karen rules, taboos and protocols. According to Sein Twa, declaring the Peace Park was only the first step of a much longer process of reviving traditional Karen governance and claiming the Salween River basin as the indigenous territory of the local people:

> Now as we go deeper, there are steps, like documenting the history of each Kaw. We have started in a few pilot areas, and we hope that all the communities can document their history to prove that they are Indigenous Peoples, to prove how may years we have been here…Within the Salween Peace Park, at that bigger scale, we identified and mapped only the famous and well known sacred sites, but in each Kaw you have a smaller areas, with local sacred sites which are protected and respected by the local people. So we have a lot of work to do, and we are also training local youth and representatives to learn mapping skills and go back and do this in their communities… They know who gave each village its name, and how the village name came about. They have their stories, and if they lose them, they cannot argue in future generations that the land is theirs – otherwise it may be changed to a Burmese name. We have the purpose of giving that knowledge and power to future generations; we need to start getting to the details of each village and their history, the names of the streams, the names of the mountains, the sacred sites in each Kaw.

Now that the Park has been declared, KESAN and the Park's General Assembly are turning their attention to strengthening Kaw governance. To steer this governance, the 26 Karen communities within the Salween Peace Park have agreed in the Charter that the Park must be based upon three central foundations: peace and self-determination, environmental stewardship, and cultural maintenance. Describing the fundamentality of Karen governance and culture to these principles, Sein Twa said:

[100] Charter of the Salween Peace Park available online at: http://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SPP-Charter-Eng.pdf

> We have three pillars to maintain the balance. If we cook rice on stone, you cannot have one stone or two stones, you need to have three stones to put your pot on. Of course, our first pillar - peace and self-determination - is very political. And then we have our second pillar: environmental stewardship, caring for nature. And the third pillar is cultural maintenance, to take care of our cultural heritage, the revitalization of our culture after suffering from so many years of civil war. So we are reviving and strengthening the Kaw system as a foundation of the Park…and cultural activities, as without [those elements] you cannot have a strong relationship between the people, the land, and the environment.

To strengthen Karen culture and promote environmental stewardship within the Park, KESAN has been supporting a number of different initiatives, including efforts to revive aspects of the Karen language related to conservation. According to Sein Twa:

> We found the biocultural links: if the Karen naming system for animal species and plant species is gone, then there is also an impact on the biodiversity…So we are looking at opportunities to revive and promote our indigenous language. We have had a few workshops to really review the documentation of these things…When you learn the vocabulary, you have to understand what the words really mean: the explanation of any one word is rich, it can be a whole process of explaining. For example, *Thet Ku* is a vocabulary of rotational farming, [but it translates as] a ritual offering to the Spirit of Rice to make the rice grow healthy and bring good harvest. It involves killing a chicken at a particular site in the filed, spreading the blood on the bamboo alter, followed by a recital prayer. You have to understand the whole process to understand just that little word. The Christians cannot understand it, because it is so much more than the meaning of the word – to understand it fully you have to ask questions, know it, see what they are doing.

The Salween Peace Park is also working to revive traditional hunting practices as a way of tempering unsustainable hunting and poaching within the Park. Sein Twa described such efforts:

> We are piloting a project on traditional hunting, which includes wildlife monitoring, management and protection. We are trying to look at Karen traditional hunting, and to record customary regulations and taboos – because the taboos identify which species are supposed to be not killed. So Gibbons, hornbills, tigers: [in our culture] those animals are prohibited from being killed. So we are digging up the taboos so that people can know that these are our practices from the past, and we are trying to revitalize those ways. Like for the hornbill, [we have a story that] says that they were human beings in a past life… Because a female hornbill makes a hole in a tree and lays eggs, and when the eggs hatch, they have to stay inside the tree, and then the male hornbill hunts and brings the food back to the female and the chicks. They said that if you kill the male hornbill, the female will die and the female and the chicks will also die. So that's why you don't kill the hornbill, and they compare it to human couples…You are also not allowed to kill the gibbons, because we say that they are the entertainers of the forest. Because when a gibbon makes a sound, you can hear it *far* away – even from across the seven forests and ridges, you can still hear him or her singing, making a very loud noise. So if you kill a gibbon the whole forest will be quiet and other inhabitants will feel very lonely; they will miss the gibbons throughout the landscape. All animals in the landscape hear the gibbon singing. So heyaay, don't kill; if you kill, the seven forests will be quiet because they have lost their entertainers. In real life, gibbons are companions of Karen farmers. My friend told me when gibbons stay in a forest close to his farm, no other monkey would ever come close to his farm and harm his paddy.

KESAN is also holding workshops and organizing exchanges to re-teach Karen cosmology to the people retuning home from the refugee camps. Sein Twa explained:

> People are coming together and sharing. When we officially launched the Salween Peace Park, we invited well known Karen elders and leaders from Thailand, including *Pati Jonni* [to speak]. He is a

renowned Karen elder, many academics call him a Karen philosopher; he has a lot of knowledge about Karen ontology: how many layers of the forest, how many layers of the earth above the ground and underneath the ground… When we invited him to the Peace Park declaration event and asked him to share his knowledge, he talked and talked, it was very complicated for me, even though I already knew a lot of the things he was talking about. But I looked out at the Karen elders, and they were really smiling, very happy, very attentive. I asked, "Did you understand what Pati Jonni was saying?" and they said, "Yeah yeah yeah! We are practising those kind of things!" They were so happy.

4. Sacred site protection

Because the Karen's indigenous spiritual cosmology puts a heavy emphasis on honouring and caring for the spirits of their particular ancestral lands by making frequent offerings and rituals, the decades of forced internal displacement were profoundly upsetting for those Karen elders who maintained their traditional beliefs. Sein Twa explained how:

> The Kaw is a central system that really holds everything together, and they have to be *in* the Kaw to do that…Why? [Because] they have a very close relationship with the living land and the people in the afterworld, the ancestors…That's why we still have the Kaw system in the Salween Peace Park, because even though people have been there facing civil war, conflicts and displacement for decades, people tried to not go very far away from their original birthplace…They see the Kaw as the dwelling place of their ancestors' spirits. And they also believe that the Kaw has a spirit, has gods: the creators and guardians of the lakes, the rivers, the forests, of the rocks and mountains…This is their belief.
>
> So that's why the people need to do their traditional ceremonies as well as observe the rituals feeding their gods or the guardians of the mountains, rivers, streams, and forests. So the elders – especially the spiritual elders (called *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* in Karen) – have been very sad, because they have not been able to fulfil their responsibilities, as passed down by their ancestors, to perform the rituals and feed the gods and spirit beings….What they are saying is that like human beings, the spirit beings are hungry, and they need offerings from the living human beings. So the practice of the ritual ceremonies: they have to perform them within their own territory. Especially in the sacred areas; they have to perform the rituals and ceremonies there, they cannot perform these rituals on another community's territory. Because if they do, they will be in breach, and the gods or guardians of the other land might not be pleased with them and they could suffer negative consequences.
>
> According to my friends who live in the area, over the last few decades, as the elder people have been displaced, some have committed suicide because they could not perform the rituals. They felt uneasy to be away from their land. The spirit of the land calls them.

The Karen's sense of spiritual obligation to their lands and ancestors is profound, deeply woven into their worldview and way of life. Tragically, the grief of displacement, and the shame and guilt of not being able to perform the necessary rituals has led not only to suicide, but also to the abandonment of their cosmology and traditions. Sein Twa explained how:

> [As a result of the displacement] there was also pressure for religious conversion….Why? During the war, people were very depressed, and suffered from illness and they felt it was a punishment from the gods for not fulfilling the rituals. Because in a traditional community, you have the resources to perform the rituals: you need a chicken a pig, a buffalo – it is not a big issue, but when you are displaced, you cannot find these animals, so you cannot perform these rituals. And in this displacement time, people could not perform [the rituals fully]. And then, when people have accidents and illness, they think it is because they have not performed the ceremonies. They then

> think if they convert to another religion, they will be released from the discomfort of not performing these rituals. The displacement from their Kaws gave them more incentive to convert to Christianity or *Bah Paw* - a hybrid or Buddhism and animism, so they didn't need to do…all the required animist traditions, rituals and ceremonies.

One of the goals of founding the Salween Peace Park was thus to create enough tenure security to allow the original residents of each of the Kaws to live within their ancestral lands, govern them according to traditional protocols, and be able to carry out traditional rituals. Indeed, Article 118 of the Salween Peace Park Charter sets out that: "The traditional indigenous Karen worldview highly values the interdependence of the forests, land, waters, wildlife and human life. Independent of religious affirmation of belief, the people of the Salween Peace Park shall resect and value [the] animist traditions, rituals and ceremonies that are part of the collective memory of the indigenous Karen People…"

Because many of these rituals must be carried out within sacred natural sites, they also made protecting sacred sites within the Peace Park an immediate priority. Sein Twa explained the importance of sacred sites to Karen culture:

> What gives meaning is the way of life, the culture, the taboos, and the sacred sites. And if you put it together, the sacred sites have a purpose, and must be kept as they are; nobody should even step a foot on it, because it is a sacred area; you should not cut, you should not do anything there – and there is a purpose to that. The purpose is not for the people; it is for the spirits and the gods, for the wild animals to thrive. In the Kaw, there will be an area that is prohibited for anyone to do anything there, and there will be an area of the forest where they keep the belongings of their dead. So they actually reserve that area for the "afterworld people" to live…[and] when we were born, our elders went and kept our umbilical cords on a tree, and there is a particular area, we call it the "*Daypor Htu* – the umbilical forest;" no one can go and do activities there, but it has a purpose, which is for the children to grow and be strong like the forest, as a symbol, as an agreement. It doesn't mean it is "vacant:" it is like you are married to the forest, you are married to the trees, just like you are married to a lady, and you promise that you will love her, something like that. This has a purpose.
>
> And even for the area of the "afterworld people" called *Loe* in Karen… the dead cannot be trapped. So that is how our beliefs keep areas protected for the community – and a sacred site such as *Loe* can belong to more than one community, or it can belong to the whole animist community to place their dead relatives' pieces of forehead skull or hairs… Even if an animist Karen elder dies in Australia or Thailand, the relative will bring his or her forehead skull piece or hairs back to the *Loe* mountain; it is a law. It's a big mountain, and no one goes and disturbs that place….[But] now we live in a different world, so we have had to demarcate these areas, mapping them on pieces of paper so we can show to outsiders when they come to grab our land that this is not vacant land, but belongs to the community, and this is how we manage and use the land, and the biodiversity will thrive in those areas, even if you don't have "biodiversity targets."

Living within the bounds of their ancestral homelands, and performing the right rituals to honour the land is not only necessary for spiritual reasons, but also for food sovereignty and food security: for the Karen, various gods must be properly honoured to ensure a successful farming season, and offerings must be made to the animals who also live and eat from the same lands. Sein Twa described how:

> The lowland paddy farming doesn't cover the whole Karen way of life – the upland systems also have to be observed, the rituals have to be performed, because, for example, from the beginning of the season to the harvest they have to do offerings to the spirits. They burn the fields before planting, so they have to make offerings to the Spirit of Fire, and give thanks to the water, and they have to perform each of these rituals in the right place and in the right way…And then until the end of the harvest, they have to give thanks to the Spirit of Rice, who have specific names in our language, and they have to thank the Gods for giving them rice so that they can eat.

> Especially in the upland areas, the upland farming, they don't just grow one kind of rice, but other kinds of food like yams, cassava, sweet potatoes, herbs and chillies - these kinds of crops. And when they harvest the rice, they allow some of it to fall into the fields to be for the birds as an offering. Even after they harvest, they still leave some plants to grow in the fields to provide food for the animals to come and eat. They do this kind of offering as part of their agricultural system. Without the rituals, we cannot perform our Karen traditional agricultural system.

However, after decades of displacement from their ancestral lands, young Karen do not necessarily know these rituals, and do not yet have intimate relationships with their ancestors, the sacred sites, and the gods and spirits of their lands. Others, who have converted to Christianity or Buddhism see no reason to continue to undertake laborious rituals, or make offerings to the animals of the land after harvest. Within the Peace Park, they are advocating for more modern livelihood strategies, and a more Western lifestyle.

With KESAN's mediation, these conflicting ideas of how land should be used are not being ignored or avoided, but rather addressed head on through community dialogue and discussion. KESAN and the General Assembly are also working to proactively ensure that the Karen youth who grew up in the refugee camps understand the nuances of Karen language and cosmology, upon which environmental taboos are based. Sein Twa described how:

> [What we are] concerned most about are the people in the refugee camps, because they have been there all their lives; they were born there or went there when they were 3 years old, and now they are in their 20s and 30s, so when they return that is a challenge and concern….I think that if we have strong Kaw institutions, clear demarcation [of sacred sites], clear regulations and written taboos, and help the students and young people get involved in the movement, taking a role in their communities, and guiding them… there can be sharing between the people who have stayed and the returning refugees.

5. Teaching the next generation

To support a post-war cultural revitalization, KESAN is working to revive ways of teaching youth about Karen culture. Of particular concern to KESAN and the General Assembly are the Karen youth who have spent the majority of their lives in refugee camps, raised far from their lands and without a traditional Karen education. Discussing the breakdown in cultural transmission caused by decades of war, internal displacement, and occupation, Sein Twa explained how: "In the villages they know our [cultural] stories, but fewer [youth know these stories] now, because of the war…When you are displaced and dispersed by conflict, your social institutions start to collapse over time. So that's why these stories have not been told to the younger generations of children."

As part of an effort to ensure intergenerational transmission of knowledge and culture, the villages within the Peace Park initiated a cultural school for children living in the Park, focused on integrating traditional Karen culture into the standard curriculum, including Karen language, music, weaving skills, and hunting practices. Describing how challenging it has been to even find young teachers who are capable of teaching traditional Karen knowledge and skills, Sein Twa noted, "Our school is the first to start teaching Karen indigenous science and skills...[but we] cannot find teachers who really know how to teach the subjects. We have to rely on the elders, and find people who know, for example, how to play Karen musical instruments. There are very few now. So we have to work hard to find these people." As part of this effort, KESAN and Park leadership have spent the past three years researching Karen culture and preparing books for the students and teachers. Sein Twa describes how these books cover:

> Many interesting topics, like handicrafts, and weaving – including the different *patterns* of weaving, and the names for the different patterns that married and unmarried women wear, the different colours and meanings in the sewing… [and] traditional musical instruments, and the

> materials, tools, and strategies the Karen use in when hunting and fishing. Also our traditional wedding ceremonies and funerals: how they are performed, etc. So all these things have a unique way of being done, and we have been working to revitalize them…. We did *a lot* of research to revitalize this!

They are also discussing how to revive the traditional Karen education system, which focuses on teaching young people by bringing them directly to the land to work and learn alongside older family members. Sein Twa explained how:

> The traditional Karen education system is a mixture of school (teaching the children in real, actual events and activities, in apprenticeships) and when they follow their parents: the boys follow their fathers, and practice cutting bamboo, making basketry, handicrafts, hunting, fishing, doing the ritual ceremonies, reciting the prayers and songs. For the girls, they follow their mothers to learn about weaving skills and other women-specific roles. In Karen traditional homes, they have a kitchen in the middle of the house, they didn't have private rooms in the old days: people would sleep around the kitchen, and in the early morning and the early evening they would cook together, sitting around the kitchen, telling stories, eating beetle nuts, talking, having visitors: you would cook and eat and sleep around the kitchen. So the kids were learning all that time…[So, we are designing a curriculum] that allows for interactions between children and elders, and for opportunities for children to go and learn in the field. So if the school allows it, if you make it obligatory, there is still the possibility of children learning as they did in the old days. So if the harvest time comes, you close the school for a few days so the children help the parents or do collective labour: all the community comes out together and helps a family finished their harvest in one day – and the next day they go to another farm, and the children can join in and enjoy this practice.

6. Outcomes

Because the Salween Peace Park is only two years old, its biodiversity and cultural revitalization impacts are yet to be seen. The potential longer-term impacts are evident, however, in how joyously the Karen elders have embraced the Park. After two generations of internal displacement and living in refugee camps, the sheer joy of returning to their homelands and reviving their practices of honouring their ancestors and feeding the spirits of their homelands is palpable. One elder reported to Sein Twa that now, "[The spirits] are happy; now that our traditional practices and the animists beliefs are being strengthened, we have seen that the spirits of nature are happy because we have been supporting them."

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Every aspect of the Salween Peace Park is a defiant show of anti-imperialism, fierce independence, and self-protection. At root, while the KNU has signed a ceasefire and committed to engage in the peace process with the Burmese government, the Karen have not relinquished their desire for self-governance. The Salween Peace Park is therefore a radical experiment in self-declared authority to manage and conserve not a country, but a biodiverse watershed and river valley – according to Karen traditional governance structures, rules, and protocols. It is *conservation as cover for sovereignty* – while the purpose of that declared sovereignty is to be free to care for, steward and protect their land, forests, waters, and sacred sites according to their own indigenous ecological knowledge – which will likely lead to more biodiverse outcomes than a state-managed conservation area (see Section II.A), and may indeed successfully block future mining, logging, and large-scale government infrastructure projects in the area.

Positively, the Park was awarded the UNDP's prestigious Equator Prize in 2020, given biannually in recognition of " outstanding community efforts to reduce poverty through the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity." As illustrated by the final case study, such international recognition may help protect the Park and increase its tenure security.

I. Governing according to the principles of *Ayni*: The Potato Park of Peru

1. Context

High up in the Andes of Peru, the 9,280-hectare Potato Park is located in the Cusco Valley, where the Quechua People of the region have cultivated potatoes for millennia. Today, more than 8,000 people of six different Quechua communities live within the Park, where they mange their communal lands under the governance of their "*Papa Arariwa* Collective."[101] The genetic biodiversity of the potatoes in the area is extraordinary: the Park is home to eight species and more than 1300 varieties of potato.

The Potato Park is focused on protecting the Quechua communities' sacred ecosystem, in particular the biodiversity of the potato species living within their fragile high elevation landscape. The relevance of this effort to this study is rooted in the Park's self-declaration and self-determination; like the Karen in Myanmar, the Quechua in these six communities created their own legal mechanism to allow for their autonomous self-governance, within which they are managing the Park according to the core tenets of Quechua cosmology, traditions and culture. To this end, the Potato Park is governed by annually-elected sacred mountains, who make key decisions concerning all significant matters in the region.

2. Quechua cosmology

According to Alejandro Argumedo, the Director of Asociación ANDES,[102] the indigenous people's organization that helped to found and establish the Potato Park, the Quechua live by a cosmological framework called *Ayllu* that governs the interconnectedness between people and the natural word. *Ayllu* translates roughly as an "ecological community" and is composed of three sub-sets:

- ***Runa*** ("like human"). The *Runa Ayllu* is the community of the humans and all the plants, animals, waters and rocks that live with humans in our homes and on our land, and participate with us in our livelihoods and day-to day living, including domesticated animals, foods we grow and farm, irrigated/tap water, and cultivated trees, flowers and plants. In return for these beings' collaboration and help in human survival, humans reciprocate by caring for those beings and supporting their full flourishing.
- ***Sallka*** ("the wild"). The *Sallka Ayllu* is those places, plants, animals and species that humans have no influence over, including wild plants, rainwater, wind, rocks, trees, and anything that lives and grows wild outside of villages and human settlements without human intervention or participation. This community of beings has its own laws and rules.
- ***Auki*** *("the sacred").* The *Auki Ayllu* includes the ancestors, the mountains, and the land itself, *Pachamama.*

For the Quechua, these three communities cooperate, achieving a balance of reciprocity, respect and interconnectedness. Achieving this balance is both the product and the conduit of *Ayni*, "the flow of vital and cosmic energy moving dynamically."[103] The Quechua perform rituals and make offerings to maintain and re-establish the harmonious flow of *Ayni* energy. Argumedo explained how:

> When these three communities – the human, the wild and the sacred – live in reciprocity, there is a force, *Ayni*, that interconnects every living element in life; a spiritual force. For us, rocks have souls, the rain has a soul: they sing, they move, they can get mad. We animate the whole world….[*Ayni*] is the spiritual force that moves everything in life and provides avenues of communication between different forces, different energies, different life forms, different spirits. So, in our view, *Ayni* is the spiritual force that brings everything together and creates the

[101] Peruvian "guardians" lead Potato Park to a secure future, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, available at http://www.fao.org/3/a-bb139e.pdf

[102] Asociación ANDES is an indigenous NGO whose activities are focused on alleviating poverty by developing and disseminating alternative models for community-led management of biodiversity and landscapes.

[103] Argumedo, Alejandro and Bernard Yun Loong Wong. 2010. "The Ayllu System of the Potato Park, Cusco, Peru." Satoyama Initiative, United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies, March 5, 2010, available at http://satoyama-initiative.org/en/the-ayllu-system-of-the-potato-park.

possibility of cooperation. Spirituality in this sense is not separate from daily practice.

As a result of this cosmology, the Quechua believe that everything is sacred, including the entire landscape and everything within it. While they do not have sacred sites, per se, Argumedo explained that:

> [We do have] more powerful entities, around which society has organized itself: these are powerful spiritual manifestations like big mountains – *Apu* –the lords and protectors, the wise forces. Because to learn about life, our shamans have to confer with them, and no matter what we do, we have to ask permission of our mountain protectors, because they are looking after your family, your community, our ancestors, and all the species that are with you – the animals, plants, etc. In our cosmology, mountains are key because in the places where we live, water is a limiting factor for life, and mountains are the producers of water, and that is how life is possible: that power of transforming the different types of energy into water.

3. Establishing sovereignty and tenure security: Self-declaring the Potato Park

In 2000, six communities in the Cusco Valley joined with Asociación ANDES to create a radical legal innovation: an "Indigenous Biocultural Heritage Area." By self-designating their territory as a protected area, they hoped to claim full sovereignty over their lands and the intellectual property rights to the thousands of potato species they have cultivated for millennia. Their aim was that, by creating a *sui generis* legal regime, they could create the space to manage their lands according to traditional ecological knowledge, and thus better protect their heritage and traditions from outside influences, preserve their potato varieties, and protect their mountain ecosystem.[104] As part of these efforts, the Park's residents made conserving their native potato varieties and recovering potatoes' genetic diversity one of their core objectives. Describing the rational for self-declaring themselves a park, Argumedo explained how:

> If you have a wild tiger you are protecting, why not a potato? Because where does a potato grow? In beautiful landscapes – we have thousands of varieties, very complex species that require very unique management. And that management is based on relationships with culture. So all the attributes that you look for to conserve a particular species or landscape are there, so what is the difference [between a tiger and a potato]? It is exactly the same things with other indigenous crops….So we created a protected area for our food.

To date, the Potato Park has never sought recognition or formal legal status as a protected area from the Peruvian government. Rather, the Park sought to create its own, alternative web of tenure security by creating an ingenious form of "relational sovereignty." Argumedo explained:

> We never collaborated with the government; we used a methodology of relational sovereignty…You start creating sovereign rights at different scales. So, at the local scale, you get the recognition of the municipalities [who are run by people from the community], and at the national scale you get the recognition of universities, etc. And at the international level, you get the recognition of donors, and other governments - for example we deposited some of our seeds with the government of Norway - or FAO [The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations]. These big international institutions have recognized the Potato Park and recognized its sovereign rights to the management of its resources. So each time you acquire a relational sovereignty, you are creating a body of sovereign rights for the community.
>
> …Ban Ki Moon once talked about the Potato Park in the General Assembly in the UN, talking about how the potato farmers are protecting 1500 different varieties of potato. So we used

[104] In recent years, rising temperatures have forced farmers to plant further and further up into the mountains. The glaciers are retreating, the snow on the mountains is reducing, and there have been changes in rainfall and extreme weather. Argumedo, Alejandro and M. Pimbert. 2008. Protecting Indigenous Knowledge Against Biopiracy in the Andes. London. IIED, available at: https://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/14531IIED.pdf

> that to have a boomerang strategy: you hit internationally, and then the force of the boomerang comes back and hits the national government! So you get sovereign rights internationally, and it comes back to the Peruvian government as something to be proud of, even though they didn't know we existed. So they just have to smile and make friends with us….And they have no choice but to recognize you, because there is so much recognition coming from the international level that they don't want to be left out, and want some association with you. We are also careful to keep good relations with the government.

To better protect their intellectual property from investors who might come, the communities within the Potato park also created an "inter-community biocultural protocol," that delineates broad outlines for access and benefit sharing relative to any benefits directly or indirectly derived from the Park's biocultural resources. The communities also set up a community fund, the profits of which are distributed equally among community members, for any financial gains generated by outsiders' use of their biocultural resources, as well as for any profits generated within the Park related to research and ecotourism.[105]

4. Human and non-human governance of the Potato Park

Because the Quechua living within the territory of the Potato Park still maintain strong indigenous spiritual practices and beliefs, the creation of the Park was less about "how to reconnect, and more about how to protect that connection." As they created the Park, the communities focused on using their customary protocols to create management and governance systems in line with their indigenous values and cosmology, and consciously chose to make all decisions in alignment with the principles of *Ayni*.[106] Argumedo explained how:

> We developed a governance approach to this area - norms that are based on *Ayni* and reciprocity…We [have also based our governance on] the principle of balance: if you have these three communities [the *Runa*, *Sallka*, and *Auki Ayllu*], you have to balance the needs and life of all three communities. So that is where the strong approach to stewardship comes from: you have to ensure that there is always respect for powerful entities, and the wild, and for the domesticated beings that live with you…With this sacred principle we could ensure that what other people call "conservation" could be achieved in a more meaningful way.

In most of the written literature concerning the Potato Park's governance, the park is described as being governed by elected representatives from each of the six villages, who together coordinate the work of the Potato Park's Association.[107] However, this body is only the governing body of the *Runa Ayllu*, the community of humans. Within the Park this human-centred governing body is subordinate to the sacred governing body of the *Auki Ayllu*: the mountains. Argumedo explained how:

> The election of the mountains and the spiritual elements of the landscape are included in the management of the Park…The Potato Park has a group of wise elders who are in charge of facilitating the election of the higher authorities, which are mountains. The current "mayor" or "mayors" are called *Yalantín*, which means "you and your double." We believe that there is always two – even the number "one" [in Quechua] doesn't mean "one," but "two." …The closest thing in humans is the husband and wife couple. So in terms of the election, *people* elect the higher authorities; a group of wise people authorize the mountains' governance by consensus. They don't talk much really, it is more a secret way of doing elections. They know which mountains are designated to be the mayor and the mayoress. These mountains have to have certain attributes that make them qualified to be the high authorities. So these mountains are the "mayorial" authorities of the landscape, and [the elders] receive communications related to who

[105] Argumedo, Alejandro (2012). *Decolonising action-research: the Potato Park biocultural protocol for benefit-sharing*, IIED.
[106] The principle of *Ayni* is woven into all that they do within the park, including workshops and trainings, which begin and end in ceremony, and include efforts to teach the next generations key rituals necessary to honouring stewardship of the land, mountains, ecosystem and the interconnected relationships between all human and non-human beings.
[107] https://satoyama-initiative.org/case_studies/the-ayllu-system-of-the-potato-park-cusco-peru/

> will be acting as the [non-human] Councillors of water, seeds, pasture, land medicinal pants, etc. - depending on what the community considers important and prioritizes.

In this nested governance system, the mountains are the supreme decision-making authority, while the human association establishes protocols and rules in alignment with the mountains' mandates. Argumedo described how: "the mountains decide things, of which humans are only one element, so, within those concepts, you respect, and you have to reciprocate in terms of rules and regulations associated with the rights of nature, and [within that,] the rights of humans."

Respected elders communicate with their governing mountains to receive direction; describing how the Quechua of the Cuzco Valley take direction from their elected governing mountains, Argumedo said:

> You have to have the right movements, the right words, the right elements of communication and all of that. And…that kind of conversation happens from 3 am until 5 am, and a lot of the conversation is silent, and a lot of the language is through coca leaves. That is why coca leaves are so sacred; it is the positioning of the coca leaves – using the veins of the leaves, if you throw a bunch of leaves in the air and they land, you will have a map, because all the leaves will be connected, and they will tell you the main veins of this connection, and the permission you have from the mountain is that it gives you the pathway through the veins in the coca leaves...There is a way of throwing for back casting or forecasting, or electing a mountain; they do the throwing and reading the cocoa leaves in a different way for each of these….[So] if you are trying to see the future path of global stressors on a local ecosystem, let's say climate change, you involve the guys who are being impacted the most - they are the big mountains, losing their hats. People are worried, because it is like the mountains are dying: they are water towers, that is their main function in an ecology like the Andes where water is a limiting factor for producing food. The land is rain fed, and water has always been considered one of the most sacred elements….So in this case, [in an environmental assessment exercise we did] the shamans are asking the mountains about what is happening with structural conditions, back-casting and forecasting what will happen.

The communities within the Potato Park then use this information to farm, make decisions, and live their lives in alignment with the mountains' directives.

5. Practicing agriculture and breeding new potato species in intimate relationship with plants

Also relevant to the Park's governance and the residents' farming strategies are the strong relationships between people and the plants that they grow for food (which are in the same family as humans, the *Runa Ayllu).* Argumedo described how the Quechua consider plant and animal species to be part of their family: "People consider these species their children, and also consider themselves the children of the plants and animals. For example, the Quechua people around Cuzco have a word for those species that provide food – *Uyuoi* – which translates sort of as "children," but is more like "what you nurture and has life and is part of your family, your relations."

Because agricultural crops and humans are thought to have co-evolved, each domesticating the other for their mutual co-evolution, the relationships between people and their food crops are ones of intimacy, respect, and honouring stewardship, grounded in rituals that request permission to farm – from the plants themselves, and from the mountains they will be grown upon. Argumedo explained how:

> We practice an agriculture that is ritualistic – so every step in food production has a ritual… So before you start production you have to use cocoa leaves, because they help you connect with the bigger spirits, and so your prayers connect what the big mountains [who grant] permission to start working. We always do a ritual with all planting and all phases of the agricultural cycle…

Because agriculture depletes the soils and depends on water, in addition to making rituals for the domestically plant species, people must also replenish the mountains and soils with offerings that "feed" and delight. Argumedo explained:

> If you are doing agriculture, there is an obligation to always ask to permission from the mountains – not just out of respect, but more importantly out of reciprocity, because you are getting things from the mountain – wind, water, medicinal plants, etc. So your well-being depends on the sacred, which is nothing abstract: you are looking at it every day, and it is looking at you, taking care of you. So the mountains need humans because the mountains also need food to be part of the larger community, and that food *is the offerings*.

How to conduct the requisite agricultural rituals and make the proper offerings is scrupulously passed from generation to generation, yet also updated in a dynamic process that allows for giving the most delicious, most wonderful offerings available in the current time, to share the food of "today," including, candies, sweets, and fine Swiss Chocolate. Argumedo described how:

> For instance, we have one ceremony called "*Pavo*" - there are four layers of different things that people have to put together like a package, then take to the mountain and do a ceremony and give it to the mountains. Mountains like sweets, always; but each mountain likes certain things – not all mountains like the same things. Some like chilli peppers. They grow wild potatoes, on the land that is also feeding the mountain, so you have to feed them some wild chillies, you know! …The mountains need you to make offerings, because otherwise you are going to take the life out of the mountain. The mountain is sucking on the offerings, feeding on them; it needs sweets and other things from outside. It's like if you travel: when you go back home, you bring sweets for the kids, gifts for the mom…It is just like that for the mountains, but you have to package it all in a certain way, in different layers according to how we conceive the world: the middle world, the upper world, then underworld, and how we conceive the connection with the stars… It is all ideologically very complex; you package all of these together, and this is your reciprocity, your thankfulness to the mountain for all the well-being it is providing to your community. So farmers have to do this, which makes agriculture very ritualistic. But at the same time, it creates the sense of neighbourhood, right? So the sacred is not that sacred, it's kind of like a big family, a big neighbourhood, like having the Pope as your neighbour.

All of these principles direct how Park residents and staff are working to breed new potato species that may be better adapted to climate changes.[108] To support their efforts, they have entered into an agreement with the International Potato Center (CIP), a non-profit food security organization, to selectively share their "living library" of potato genetic knowledge. To date, the Potato Park has shared more than 200 of its 900 native potato varieties with CIP scientists, while and the CIP has repatriated roughly 400 varieties to farmers in the Potato Park. As with all endeavours within the Park, breeding efforts are undertaken wholly in alignment with the Quechua's cosmology and intimate relationships with other members of their *Runa Ayllu.* Argumedo explained how:

> In our research, for instance, if you want to make a new variety of potatoes that is resistant to frost or a climate change challenge that is coming, we ask: how do we apply the *Ayni* principles into plant breeding?... It is not a law, more about a force that you must respect so that you achieve balance and respect because everything is interconnected… [And] certain potatoes have certain abilities – some have to be planted at the border, at the front, because people believe that they are guards because if someone is trespassing your plot, that potato sends you dreams to let you know there is a trespass – so if you are going to capture that kind of taxonomy you have to address the spiritual aspects of it all.

[108] https://www.boell.de/en/2016/01/25/potato-park-peru; https://forestsnews.cifor.org/25936/small-farmers-in-peru-build-climate-resilience-with-innovation-living-lab#.VJkdqP8q5s

> ...And the way we do it is to know there is a spiritual part [of each species], along with the mind and heart. So we make an economic objective, a spiritual objective and an environmental objective. So for the spiritual objective, we ask: "What parts of this potato need to be strengthened spiritually?" So we get together with elders, who explain that the way that this potato helps the environment and communicates with the other beings is though its flowers. So we look to say, "How do we make the flower more sweet, or more colourful?" So we go into the emotional beauty aspect of the variety and then consider that when we do the breeding. And then, we say, "Okay, environmentally, what is the issue here? Resistance to frost." So we look into that, and we say "Okay, we need to increase that issue in the breeding." And then the economic issue: it is not size, but nutrition, and so we work on increasing the nutritional value of the potato. So that's the way we keep these principles in the modern world. The farmers do this, too.

This method of breeding potato varieties according to the "personality," "strengths," contributions – and likely the expressed desires - of the plant changes the energy behind the science of breeding, making it more of a dialogue of interconnectedness between the potato beings and the human beings involved. This small example is a wide lens into how deeply the communities inside the Potato Park are living out their cosmology in the careful tending of their territory, while also keeping sharply attuned to the current moment – of climate change, emerging science, and economics. Indeed, the Quechua communities of the Potato Park are shrewdly aware that culture is dynamic, and must constantly adapt to the present. Argumedo describes how:

> We try to keep the traditional methods of acquiring, transmitting and storing knowledge. They cannot be extracted from their own particular evolution, so to speak, because things change, things adapt and re-adapt: you cannot say "this is the way it was done in the 1500's, so that has to be the way." No….the one key element here is the cosmovision: the cosmologies have not changed, because the values and principles that are derived from those cosmologies continue to be vibrant.

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High in the mountains of Peru, the communities of the Potato Park are forging a new model of self-declared indigenous protected areas that is now gaining momentum globally.[109] The Potato Park is an extraordinary example of a people who, intent on protecting and conserving their ecosystem according to millennia-old principles of respect, interconnectedness, and inter-species familial relations, did not wait for outsiders to "grant" them tenure rights and management authority over lands that were already theirs, but rather declared it themselves and got on with protecting what they hold most sacred and vital. The Potato Park communities are also modelling a "new" hybrid kind of science, one that merges indigenous science and western science: listening to the desires of the sentient being being bred, then using modern scientific methods to support it to evolve in alignment with its own particular physical metaphysical contributions to the ecosystem it lives within. Together with Asociación ANDES, the Potato Park communities have found a way to: successfully protect their land rights, sacred sites, and food sovereignty; define the principles of their own self-governance; and evolve their culture in alignment with both the realities of modernity and their ancient indigenous wisdom and practices.

[109] See e.g. Zurba, et. al, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), Aichi Target 11 and Canada's Pathway to Target 1: Focusing Conservation on Reconciliation, *Land* **2019**, *8*(1), 10; https://doi.org/10.3390/land8010010

IV. Discussion

A. Overview and analytical framework

The central question of this inquiry was: “What is being done to strengthen, support or revive the cultural values, beliefs, rules and practices that function or previously functioned to promote biodiversity of sacred natural sites?” As the research progressed, a secondary question emerged: “How can communities remember, revive and protect the cosmologies, ceremonies, and rituals necessary to honour, care for and protect sacred natural sites?” Inherent in both questions is a focus on concrete strategies and methodologies. However, underneath the very concrete and specific strategies described in the case studies are much larger questions of identity, belonging, and connectedness with the more-than-human world.

As such, while this analysis sets out a typology of six overarching strategies discerned from the case studies, it also explores the slow and subtle process of healing layers of internalized oppression that manifest in beliefs that one’s cosmology is not only wrong, but deeply threatening. Fear, shame and grief permeate the background of every one of the case studies; respondents repeatedly used the words “demonic” and “satanic” when describing outsiders’ preconceptions of their indigenous cultures - their work often had to confront those conceptions directly. How a culture addresses such forces and restores a sense of dignity based on a deep sense of place and self is the true subject of this study - and is thus woven throughout the typology of strategies explored below. This discussion concludes by considering three intangible but equally necessary aspects inherent in efforts to strengthen and revive indigenous cultures and cosmologies.

The following two tables assist in this analysis. The first table is purely an overview of the case studies: it summarizes the kinds of sacred natural sites and how they were/are traditionally governed; the threats faced; the impacts of these threats on culture, beliefs, the local ecosystem and sacred natural sites; and the communities’ countervailing efforts to remember, revive or strengthen the practices and belief systems that have traditionally functioned to protect and conserve their sacred natural sites and wider ecosystem.

Table 3: Summary of sacred natural sites, threats to culture, impacts of these threats, and strategies pursued

Case Study	Sacred sites and their governance	Threats	Impacts of Threats	Strategies Pursued
Tao (Taiwan)	• Whole island considered sacred • Sacred cycles related to fish migrations and their marine habitats • Strong taboos regulate ecosystem protection and protect against overharvesting of fish	• Tourism/capitalism • Off-island Western education, youth leaving • Nuclear waste and millions of USD in awarded damages • Colonial governance structure	• Traditional homes demolished • Whole culture weakening • Few remaining native language speakers • Depth and meaning behind rituals is weakening • Youth knowledge of culture is shallow • Taboos not being followed	• Capturing historical recordings and stories in comprehensive Tao library • Trying to save language • Mapping lands, cataloguing and registering Tao names for sacred sites • Created Tao TEK ethnobiology database • Created "Tribal Heritage Keepers Group"
Colombian Amazon	• Entire forest is sacred, with specific sacred sites related to origin stories, animal breeding grounds, water, etc. • *Maloca* as the human manifestation of sacred sites • Shamans mediate between Guardian Spirits and humans	• Enslavement during rubber boom • Guerrilla war • Colonialism/ enforced Catholicism • International mining companies •	• Youth not respecting sacred natural sites, leaving community for work • Could not perform rituals for 20+ years • One tribe lost sacred language	• Received title to 20 million hectares of rainforest • Created park to stop mining • Regained control over education, health and governance systems • Made youth into researchers to teach culture • Borrowed language to revive relations with Guardian Spirits • Installed local teachers to teach in own language
Venda (South Africa)	• Specific sacred sites, especially forest areas, mountains, lakes, waterfalls • Sacred animal species according to clan totem • Clans; elders mediating between ancestors and humans	• Christians demonizing indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices • Mining companies • Corrupt chiefs and businessmen • Western education • Internalized colonization in wider community	• Hotels built on sacred natural sites • Ecosystem degradation, loss of forests •	• Re-instituted indigenous governance roles • Publicly proclaiming validity of sacred natural sites and rituals • Educating youth • Filing lawsuits to stop mining/desecration of SNS • Tree planting/ecosystem restoration
Tharaka (Kenya)	• Specific sacred natural sites on land, and related to mountains, large rocks, springs, rivers • Each clan has specific sites they are responsible for	• Christians demonizing indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices • Western education • Internalized colonization in wider community	• Lost traditions, food, seeds, dress, rituals • Sacred sites desecrated, • More hunger with loss of seeds and traditional foods	• Revived seeds and foods • Revived traditional dress • Revived traditional medicine • Remembered rituals • Performed cursing ritual to protect sacred natural site • Founded school for youth • Reviving rites of passage
Bagungu (Uganda)	• Specific sacred natural sites related to land, springs, lakes, rivers, swamps and other waterways • Each clan has specific sites they are responsible for	• Mining/extractives • Christians demonizing indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices • Western education • Internalized colonization in wider community	• Lost traditions, food, seeds, rituals • Sacred sites degraded, biodiversity lost • Ecosystem impacted by mines/overfishing • More hunger with loss of seeds and traditional foods	• Re-strengthened customary clan governance system • Revived rituals, now practicing frequently • Unearthed sacred site guardians, re-established their authority, and created informal support networks • Catalogued rules, now formalizing these rules as a district ordinance
Dagara (Ghana)	• All of land is sacred, soil is sacred • Certain specific sacred sites, especially forests • Elders and *Tingan Sob* mediate between ancestors and humans	• Gold mining by international companies • Illegal small-scale mining • Corrupt Chiefs • Food insecurity Youth leaving for cities	• Degradation of ecosystem • Youth moving to cities for work, education • Hunger from loss of seeds, non-IP agriculture	• Performed public ritual to stop all mining • Revived indigenous agriculture

Central Asia	• Network of sacred natural sites across vast region, including mountains, rivers, lakes, large rocks, springs, rivers • Cared for by appointed guardians	• Imperial/colonial government still in place in Russia • Murder/disappearance of most spiritual leaders • Religious fundamentalism • Western education • Rapid influx of post-Soviet capitalism	• Ceremonies, rituals and pilgrimages forgotten, or practiced in hiding • Degradation of sacred natural sites • Loss of memory of how to hold rituals in Kyrgyzstan	• Made parks to protect land • Created landowners association to protest pipeline • Revived ceremonies w/help from various shaman • Catalogued sacred natural sites and their significance • Created a network of sacred site custodians • Built education centre to teach culture and ritual
Karen (Myanmar)	• Specific sacred sites, especially forests • Certain sacred animal species • Each Gaw responsible for caretaking their own sacred sites • Regional sacred sites for ancestors	• Oppressive, militarized government • 70 years of violent conflict • Mining, logging, land grabs • Large-scale infrastructure development • Internal displacement, refugee camps	• Removed from their lands, so could not perform rituals • Generations grown up in refugee camps, with scant knowledge of culture • Ecosystem being damaged	• Created Salween Peace Park • Revived Gaw governance system within park • Teaching TK skills to youth
Quechua (Peru)	• Entire ecosystem sacred and related • Governance of land by annually elected mountain deities	• Climate change • Colonialism/enforced Catholicism	• Ecosystem degraded by climate change • Food security threatened	• Created *sui generis* Potato Park • Governing by traditional cosmological systems • Caretaking sacred species in collaboration with CIP • Breeding new varieties to ensure future food supply/resilience

Notably, the efforts undertaken in the nine case studies explored herein resulted in a variety of positive impacts: sacred sites were mapped, demarcated, and protected; indigenous lands were titled; ecosystems are being restored and conserved; traditional governance bodies were revived; women were empowered to re-assume their roles as seed keepers and spiritual leaders; communities' seeds were recovered, resulting in increased food security and nutrition; long-forgotten rituals were revived and performed; ancestors, sacred sites and spirits are again being "fed" and cared for; and generations of internalized colonization are slowly being faced and addressed, leading to greater pride and courage among both groups and individuals.

A second table establishes the analytical framework shaping this discussion: six overarching "categories" of strategies that the communities profiled in the case studies employed to revive their cultures and protect their lands and sacred natural sites. It provides a quick overview of the strategies each community pursued. These strategies are:

1. Courageous leadership, paired with regular meetings that build trust and solidarity and allow for authentic community dialogue;
2. Efforts to ring-fence the communities' territory, so as to achieve tenure security and a degree of sovereignty, within which there is greater freedom to govern according to indigenous cosmologies and knowledge;
3. The revival or strengthening of indigenous governance structures that govern in alignment with traditional beliefs, practices, and protocols;
4. The revival of core aspects of culture, including seeds, agricultural practices, medicine, music, etc.;
5. The remembrance and enactment of ceremonies and rituals that function to protect, care for, and "feed" sacred natural sites, ancestors, deities, and the wider local ecosystem; and
6. The creation of systems and programs that ensure intergenerational transfer of knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews.

Table 4: Typology of strategies, illustrating the efforts made by each group

Strategies Pursued	Taiwan	Colombia	South Africa	Kenya	Uganda	Ghana	Altai	Myanmar	Peru
Regular community dialogue led by strong leadership		X	X	X	X	X		X	
Establishment of tenure security/sovereignty over land		X					X	X	X
Revival of indigenous governance structures		X	X		X			X	X
Revival of traditional knowledge, skills, practices		X	X	X	X	X		X	
Strengthening and/or revival of land-honouring rituals and ceremonies		X	X	X	X		X	X	
Establishment of intergenerational knowledge transfer systems	X	X	X	X			X	X	

B. Practical strategies

By necessity, the groups profiled in the case studies innovated and explored strategies that simultaneously addressed both internal and external threats to their cultures, ecosystems, and ways of life. The following six strategies are explored below.

Relative to this analysis, it is important to briefly note at the outset that *internal threats* to sacred natural sites and the indigenous cosmologies they are situated within are often much more challenging to address than *external threats*. In many cases, this is because external threats often transmute over time into internal threats: as discussed in the literature review and shown in the case studies, the colonial enforcement of a monotheistic religion often, generations later, becomes so fully internalized that a majority of community members then oppress the expression of their own culture. As well stated by Guri, "We are now *colonizing ourselves* – and that is more dangerous, because you can't *blame* anyone." The lack of clear division between internal and external threats is also evident in ideological conflicts between elders and youth: educated in westernized schools and excited by technology and free market capitalism, young people are forsaking their indigenous traditions, cosmologies and livelihoods.

In such instances, there is indeed no one to "blame" and nothing to "fight" – just trends and influences to creatively and courageously engage with - within families, communities, and psyches. In contrast, purely external threats are relatively "easy," as they can galvanize a community to band together against an outside "enemy." As shown in the case studies, when a mining company or an imperial/colonial government can be pointed to as a force that will destroy sacred sites, poison community lands and waters, or usurp community authority to manage and administer their territory, communities rather quickly and effectively take action, leveraging every power available to them, both legal/political and supernatural.

1. The prerequisite to all action: courageous leadership and regular meetings that build trust and solidarity and allow for authentic community dialogue that slowly dismantles internalized oppression

Any community-wide effort needs a leader or group of leaders to steer, direct, and champion the larger group. And indeed, all of the case studies are characterized by the strong, clear – and flexible – leadership of a courageous individual or group of individuals. In South Africa, Mphatheleni Makaulule started meeting with women elders who, now as the NGO Dzomo la Mupo, are fighting to protect

Venda sacred sites. In Kenya, Simon Mitambo returned to his home community in Kenya and began simply by convening a group of elders, who, for more than a decade now, have been working together to revive their Tharaka culture and protect their sacred sites. In Uganda, as well, Tabaro Dennis found one sacred site guardian, Kagole Margret, willing to publicly declare herself; together, they managed to find seven other sacred site guardians brave enough to start meeting privately; out of that initial group, the traditional governing structure of the entire tribe has been revived, and their customary rules reinstated. Similarly, in Colombia, Martín von Hildebrand simply began by sitting and asking the community elders to tell their origin stories; out of that effort came legal title to 20 million hectares of land, and a national park run completely according to indigenous cosmology and traditional knowledge.

However, in most of the case studies, these individuals - and the groups they convened - had no grand plan at first, no pre-defined path forward, and little idea what would happen as a result of their efforts.[110] They knew only to begin meeting and talking with like-minded individuals. Describing those first steps, Tabaro thought only: "I should follow up, and start knowing more about sacred natural sites and the traditions and practices of communities!" Similarly, von Hildebrand began what would be a lifetime's work simply by being present, and asking questions; he recounted how "When I arrived, from the very beginning, I said, 'I'm not bringing any answers, it is *your* answers that count, this isn't my problem, its *your* problem. I am here and I'm willing to support you, but you have to find the answers, so let's discuss.'" Makaulule just went alone to the forest to heal herself and, before she knew it, elders from neighbouring villages starting coming out to the forest to meet with her. Offering a beautiful metaphor for describing the driving force behind the various groups' efforts, Makaulule said:

> This woman would say, "You know there is something like a stick, beating your leg and saying "Hey hey hey, stand up and walk to Dzomo la Mupo for the meeting!" And we would be talking up to midnight, not sleeping. This something which holds that stick and says "Go to Dzomo La Mupo for the meeting!" What is that for you? Why didn't you stay at home? What was it that was beating you? Because most of them were elders, but they could not stay at home. That driving force is beyond ourselves. And the energy which we get from our work is beyond ourselves.

That small stick is perhaps the central actor in most of the case studies: something beyond one's conscious awareness driving forward both individual and collective action. In one light, that driving force is a personal longing – mixed with grief and hope – for an amorphous sense of "home;" a relaxation into who you most deeply are in your blood and bone; a connection with your ancestors and their wisdom; a deeper meaning of what it means to be a human being; and an interrelatedness with the land, plants, animals, mountains, and waters much larger and deeper than modern, westernized society allows for.

In the case studies, these longing were met and nurtured when brave, open-minded individuals convened groups of elders or joined with other like-minded people. In two-thirds of the case studies, regular group meetings created a necessary momentum: the *collective* process of remembering their heritage and talking openly about the challenges and threats facing them was a critical element in fostering the courage necessary to revive their cultures, remember their rituals, and protect their sacred natural sites. For these group meetings helped people to *together* discuss and address internalized shame about their indigenous culture; build confidence and pride in their heritage and knowledge; and overcome their fears of being persecuted for advocating for a revival of their ancestral ceremonies and rituals.

Their fears, in many instances, were real, and grounded in history. Even putting aside intergenerational trauma - stemming from the violence of Apartheid or the colonial-era persecution of indigenous shaman by the Catholic Church in Latin America or the Soviets throughout Central Asia and Siberia, for example - a strong theme running through the case studies is the threat of present-day persecution by neighbours and local religious leaders. In South Africa, when she started meeting with elders, Makaulule described how: "When we first sat to talk about sacred sites, *Zwifho*, women would say to me,

[110] A different, but just as effective kind of leadership can be seen in the stories of Paul Sein Twa and Alejandro Argumendo, who, in their capacity as directors of indigenous organizations (KESAN and Asociación ANDES, respectively), organized significant, well-thought out efforts to protect sacred sites.

'Don't talk about *Zwifho*! The Christians will be angry at us!'… Because that time was the time when if you even say '*Zwifho*,' you will be an outcast of the community. People at that time who were doing the rituals, people would say of them, 'You are a demon person.'" In Kenya, before he held his first meeting with the elders, colleagues and friends warned Mitambo that he would be denounced as "demonic," and arrested by the government for reviving "'retrogressive cultural rituals.'" And as he met with the Bagungu elders, Tabaro was approached on various occasions and "confronted by local leaders of the church, who said, 'You, man! We hear you have meetings with these old men and women who are practicing witchcraft!'" Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan, which is majority Muslim, the people who tried to keep alive the practice of fire ceremonies "were accused of worshipping devils."

These threats continue today: when speaking with me, Mitambo noted how "even the other day there was a [neighbouring] community that burnt some of these people, saying they were witches," while Cholponai Usubalieva-Grishuk described how: "People are now becoming very radicalized and Islamicized, so now again…these practices are considered very bad and sinful by the radical groups, who are now even destroying sacred sites."

What is important to realize is that within the context of a westernized society telling them that their cultures were lesser, backwards, savage, uncivilized, or "demonic," *the meetings themselves were the process of reviving the culture and protecting the sacred sites*. Their open-ended discussions *were the revival of culture* – which could then be made manifest in the external world through planting trees, mapping and demarcating sacred sites, reviving rituals, and teaching their children, etc. Simply meeting together and openly, bravely talking about their cultures and cosmologies was, in many ways, the most critical step. For example, in Kenya, at the Tharaka community's first meeting, after Mitambo explained his desire to revive Tharaka culture,

> [People] started crying, telling me "You have come at the right time." Some were crying that I had come a bit too late, soon after some very knowledgeable elders had just died. People…started saying, "We need to bring back our millet and our stories, we need tell our children where we came from; we need to bring back or clans, our rituals!"…[Now,] every time we meet, we don't meet with an agenda, we meet with an *intention*. When we start the meetings, we start with songs. So many things come through the songs - our ancestors arrive, our hearts arrive, and we all feel we have arrived. We must feel we have arrived before we can start the meeting… So we check in, and then the elders talk about something that is in their heart: they say, "Ah, today, I'd like to hear more about this, because the other day my grandson came and wanted to know about this," and then a continuation of their question is the focus of that meeting.

That kind of free-flow meeting *is* the revival of culture in practice. (It is also an inherently non-Western manner of holding a meeting, without a fixed agenda or pre-determined "action items.") The group discussions also likely created a safe, supportive environment to gently help participants identify internalized shame and confront it together. For example, the Tharaka women, even after having gone the route of reviving an almost lost art of making their traditional clothing, were still shy to travel publicly to their meetings wearing these clothes. Mitambo explained how: "They used to arrive in other clothing, and when they got to the meetings, they would change. Then another woman challenged them, [saying] 'Are you not proud of these clothes?' So now they come from their homes in these traditional dresses, and they look very beautiful." Mitambo also described how his community had to sit and discuss their fears and misconceptions about Tharaka traditional medicine, in particular their discomfort related to the practice of spitting as a healing modality.

Similarly, in Uganda, as the Bagungu sacred site guardians slowly crept out of hiding and began openly discussing their traditions, they realized that their main priority was less about learning specific skills and knowledge, and more about confidence building. Tabaro explained how: "We don't talk about capacity building, because the *capacity* is there: we talk about *confidence building*. We say, 'Look here, this is your life, and you need to live that life.' It brings back their dignity; the women as custodians of seeds regained that kind of dignity." Likewise, in Colombia, Gaia Amazonas' work helped the communities to, as

described by von Hildebrand, “recuperate their confidence in their cosmology, in their understanding – and …[to] sit with the government and say, ‘We also have a culture’ and talk with absolute confidence.”

Addressing internalized shame, reclaiming pride and dignity, and taking action against seemingly insurmountable outside forces becomes much easier in a strong, supportive group that sings, prayers, and remembers *together*. The group process of collectively remembering who they are and building each other’s confidence was a key element in the groups’ successes. Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, the previous Executive Director of the ICCA Consortium, described how:

> There is a need for people to *tell themselves* who they are. In their local language, especially. Because the language is very much part of the story of the land. Their being completely overpowered by other imposed languages, which impose a different view of the world, is part of the dispossession….By moving through life and learning, we create who we are, and this can involve a sense of the precious connections between us and other people, us and the land, words, languages, music – this web of connections and preferences and meanings and values becomes what we are and what we make ourselves to be. So at a certain point a community, with the benefit of all the past learning and history transmitted through generations, decides: “We are a people with a certain bond to this particular territory, and we care for it, and we are custodians and *we are here*!” This is a moment when there is a full, collective shared recognition. So as much as it is important for a person to recognize who they are, it is very important for a *community* to recognize this as well.

Tabaro, who came from such a westernized community that he had to find a community on the other side of the country to undergo this process with, very beautifully described the process of dismantling his own internalized colonization - and the vertigo-like process of discarding core belief structures that formerly guided his life:

> I started questioning myself and looking at what I believed and what I knew since my childhood up to now. I was wondering what I was told, what I learned in school, whether it was the truth – and I started getting a different story altogether….I’m telling you, it feels like you are in a certain world, and you are in a world which you are not sure about, because it is away from the things you have been told, and it is a life that takes you deep, deep back to your ancestors. You feel like you are with your ancestors. You feel like you are apart, deep in the forest, and lost, and then at the same time, you feel that you have found yourself.

Importantly, the various groups’ efforts were driven by the momentum of delight and a sense of joy. For those elders who grew up in communities still practicing their traditions, after decades of hiding, concealing, and watching their children and grandchildren drift further towards a western way of life, these group discussions were a relief, a kind of homecoming. It is difficult to express in words the complexity of this joy: heartbreakingly hopeful, cautious at first, like a coiled spring, likely joined with tears. Indeed, among the Karen in Myanmar, the frequent meetings that KESAN convened to draft the Charter and create the Salween Peace Park were a source of profound pleasure to the elders. Describing this, Paul Sein Twa reported how, when KESAN invited a renowned Karen philosopher to come speak, he “looked out at the Karen elders, and they were really smiling, very happy, very attentive. I asked, “Did you understand what Jhati was saying?” and they said, ‘Yeah yeah yeah! We are doing that kind of thing!’ They were so happy.” The Karen elders are also reporting that now that the Park has been established and they are back in their ancestral territories, the spirits are very happy as well.

In Uganda, too, once the meetings became larger and encompassed more sacred site guardians, people started reporting dreaming of their ancestors for the first time in many years; Tabaro related how this “was not something that was threatening. In fact, they were happy.” Echoing this sentiment, Makaulule similarly described how: “Our way of life was criticized, demonized, called ‘out-dated’ – but what *makes* us is to feed that interrelationship [between humans and the more-than-human world]; we can have all our modern human needs fulfilled, but it does not satisfy our ‘inner person.’” And in Colombia, von Hildebrand described the communities’ joyful reclamation of pride in their culture: “They started buying things, and realized the

power wasn't there…They started realizing that they had a chance to live their traditions, the pleasure of nature, the pleasure of being free, of having their rhythms, of sitting at night and talking in their language – because that gives them pleasure…the satisfaction of life, of their culture, of *their* life…."

Generally, once the groups had been meeting in earnest for some time, making maps of their territories, drawing ecological calendars, building trust, going together out into nature, discussing and remembering their traditions, and facing and gently dismantling their fear and shame, they could then begin the more tangible work of reviving key aspects of their culture, protecting their sacred sites, strengthening their governance systems, and fighting the external forces threatening to degrade their lands and destroy their sacred sites.

2. Ring-fencing their territories to strengthen tenure security and increase sovereign management authority

Land tenure security[111] – both the legal right to not be forcibly dispossessed from your lands, as well as *the felt sense* that your land rights are secure – is often a prerequisite to food security, community cohesion and resilience, and the care, conservation and stewardship of the local landscape. [112] While working to address intra-community challenges, roughly half the groups also pursued various strategies designed to strengthen their tenure security by seeking title to their lands or by creating various kinds of legal or quasi-legal parks and conservation areas. Such efforts are exercises in ring-fencing: creating protective outer boundaries that say, "this is ours," while allowing for territorial governance based on indigenous knowledge and cosmologies. For example, in Colombia, the Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon sought and received formal title to 20 million hectares of forest, then, when faced with mining companies granted licenses by the government to mine within their territory, successfully campaigned for their lands to be designated a national park, within which mining is illegal. In the Altai, Danil Mamyev led various communities to create a string of national parks that protect important sacred sites and pilgrimage routes from mining and industry.

An alternative model of particular interest are the efforts of the Karen in Myanmar and the Quechua of Peru's Cuzco Valley. Both groups, after meticulously researching various legal options to protect and conserve their lands, chose to create *sui generis* legal instruments through which they *self-declared* their own protected areas. To create the Salween Peace Park, the NGO KESAN and the 26 communities living within the Salween River Valley brought their proposal to form the park to the Karen National Union, who ratified it during their annual Congress. The communities then spent years holding consultations and drafting a charter for the park, which they passed by supermajority vote. In the context of the Karen's 60-year struggle for independence, the Salween Peace Park is a radical experiment in self-declaring the authority to manage and conserve a biodiverse watershed and river valley. Similarly, in Peru, Asociación ANDES and six local communities created a radical legal innovation: an "Indigenous Biocultural Heritage Area" within which they could steward the land according to Quechua cosmology and use their indigenous knowledge to protect the more than 1,300 species of potato they had been cultivating for millennia.

These two examples illustrate the creative power of radical, post-colonial thinking: in both instances, the communities did not wait for outsiders to "grant" them tenure rights and management authority over

[111] Tenure security is "the reasonable guarantee of on-going duration of land rights, supported by the certainty that one's rights will be recognized by others and protected by legal and social remedies when challenged." (Knight, 2010)

[112] Describing the changes that come when a community gains legal ownership to their lands, Pooven Moodly, the Executive Director of the NGO Natural Justice, explained how: There is a community in the Free State that has essentially been brutalized for generation upon generation, kicked from one farming community to another, and which as a result lost its identity, culture, and rituals. Some went to the mines, some worked on the farms….Now they finally have their "home" and title to their land as a community association, and … seeing their journey over the past six years, I've observed various things. The first thing is a growing sense of security, "We don't need to just have timbers with stones on them" – which were their innovation so that they could easily pack up their houses and move. So there is a sense of security that is returning: they can now build permanent structures. And then there is a sense of dignity, of who they *are* as people…That dignity is key. The third thing is that people feel that they can now be decision-makers, they can decide what happens … They are now sitting in their own discussions, asking "What do we do with this piece of land? Based on the knowledge we have, how do we solve the water system?" They are then starting to pull from the knowledge they got from their grandparents… And the last thing is that there is a very different relationship with the land - even if they are just talking on the land, they feel different: they are safe, it is *their* land, its their children's land - fundamentally that shifts people."

lands that were already theirs and ecosystems they had been tending responsibly for thousands of years. Rather, they declared that authority themselves, and are now conserving their ecosystems according to their indigenous cosmologies and ecological expertise. Both parks have gained international recognition – both through prestigious global awards and by cultivating relationships with various organizations within the United Nations system. Such recognition creates, as explained by Alejandro Argumedo of Asociación ANDES, a kind of "relational sovereignty." These alternative models are gaining ground, for example through the creation of "Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas" (ICCAs), which, although they are supported by various international covenants and agreements, rarely have legal status in their own countries. [113]

3. Revival of traditional governance structures; establishment of indigenous rules and protocols

As described in the literature review above, governance has two central components: 1) the rules, protocols and norms by which a community governs itself, and 2) the institutions bequeathed the power to make decisions, manage commons, and enforce these rules. The Colombians, Bagungu, Karen and Quechua communities all worked to revive or restore both their indigenous governing institutions *and* their traditional rules for protecting their sacred natural sites and conserving the biodiversity of their ecosystems. These groups went about these efforts in two main ways: In Colombia and Uganda, they sought state approval and legal sanction of their right to manage their territories according to customary rules, while in Peru and Myanmar, (as with the self-declaration of their parks) the communities made no effort to seek state approval.

In Colombia, von Hildebrand understood that for full sovereignty, the tribes needed: 1) to own their land; 2) for national laws to support their sovereignty; and 3) strong, organized indigenous governments that could negotiate as equals with the Colombian government. Together with tribal leaders, he spent the next forty years putting each of these elements in place. For these same reasons, the Bagungu (who automatically own their land under Ugandan law)[114] meticulously codified their traditional rules, then submitted them for formalization by the Ugandan district government. While they did so, they were simultaneously reviving and strengthening their customary governance structure, the clans.

The Colombian communities made two noteworthy innovations. First, they successfully negotiated with the government that when they transformed their lands into a national park, that park would be run entirely according to their indigenous rules and governing frameworks, and by their own governing bodies. The park is now governed by a management plan they wrote themselves, enshrining their rules, protocols, norms and beliefs into its legal framework. When the government agreed to this, it set national precedent legitimizing indigenous legal frameworks. As expressed by von Hildebrand, by formally adopting the tribes' rules for managing the national park, "the government has accepted a way of taking care of nature through a cosmology and a world vision that they don't really understand – not responding to science and technology, but to meditation and energy flow." Second, the elders realized that if they simply sat down and drafted the rules themselves, those rules would mean little to the rest of their communities, who would not "own" the rules as their own. Instead, as described by von Hildebrand: "They said, 'No. We will get the young people to do all the research, and write it down – because if the young people don't know and understand, the rules will be nothing.'" This strategy has proved effective; today, as reported by von Hildebrand, while in other places around the Amazon young people accept money from tourists to take them to sacred sites, "in this park, the youth will not take tourists to the sacred sites because they understand it will bring illness upon their community."

Reviving and codifying their rules and restoring their customary governance structures has been tremendously empowering for both groups. Tabaro described how, when they started meting, the clan

[113] See https://www.iccaconsortium.org/

[114] Chapter 15, § 237 (3-4) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995 provides that: "Land in Uganda shall be owned in accordance with the following land tenure systems: customary; freehold; mailo; and leasehold…" Uganda's Land Act (1998) sets out that customary land rights do not need to be titled or registered to be considered valid; the law recognizes customary rights of ownership regardless of whether the owners have a legal document to evidence their land claims. Land Act 1998 (Ch 227), Act 16/1998,

structure was dormant - many of the people fulfilling the clan roles "had abandoned their responsibilities." But eventually, "the different structures started meeting. And then they said, 'We want to meet the District Council.'" The felt sense of diplomatic empowerment in that statement is significant: after they had re-established their customary governance structure, they felt themselves to be a sovereign people again, ready to meet with the Ugandan government as equals: statesmen to statesmen.

However, the Karen's and the Quechua's radically anti-colonial path of self-declaring the rules and governing structures of how they run their parks eschewed efforts to seek the "permission" or approval of the central state. In Myanmar, after years of warfare and displacement, the strengthening and restoration of the Kaw, the Karen traditional governance structure, is "the heart of the Peace Park initiative."[115] While the Salween Peace Park Charter sets out a modern representative governance structure that coordinates between the 26 communities residing within the Park, each of those 26 Kaw is now governing themselves according to their own traditional knowledge, rules, taboos and protocols.[116] Similarly, having self-declared its existence and created it own governance framework, the Potato Park is entirely governed according to the Quechua principle of *Ayni*, which translates to "the flow of vital and cosmic energy moving dynamically." The community's rules balance the needs of the three communities in their cosmology: humans and all domesticated beings; the wild; and the ancestors, mountains, and earth. And, while there is a human-led association whose function is to coordinate between the six communities living within the park, all major decisions are made by the elected mountains, whose mandates dictate the human world's actions.

The different tactics taken lead to important questions concerning the role and power of state sanction, and the necessity of seeking that sanction. Ostrom's seventh design principle for the good governance of the commons is that "higher-level authorities recognize the right of the resource appropriators to self-govern." (Ostrom 1999).[117] The legitimacy of governing bodies hits directly at issues of sovereignty and decolonization: while it is absolutely necessary for the local people being governed to embrace the rules and institutions governing them, how crucial is it for the central state to recognize those rules? When indigenous rules and governing bodies are not legitimized by the nation state the indigenous territory is located within, how much authority can they have?[118]

The experiences of the Dzomo la Mupo – which is not operating within a tightly conscribed outer boundary, but protecting sacred sites across the entire Limpopo Province – shed further light on this question. Dzomo la Mupo's central operating principle has been the reinstatement of the authority of one aspect of traditional Venda governance: the role of the *Makhadzi*. As explained by Makaulule, "We have the role played by the *Makhadzi* – this is the role played by a woman in ancestral rituals and in prayer….the one who carries the voice of prayers through the sacred sites to reach the Creator. But colonization came and erased that, saying, 'No more rituals, no more *Makhadzi*.'" Reinstated into their authority, these women now are an empowered collective force, who have appointed themselves – in the absence of formal state recognition – as the protectors and defenders of Venda sacred natural sites. As part of their self-designated charge, they spent five years cataloguing Venda rules for sacred natural sites, and have posted some of these rule on their website and distributed them widely. However, it remains unclear whether South Africa's courts and police will enforce those rules. In the case of the Phiphidi waterfall, while the South African courts ruled that developers could not build a hotel at the sacred site, the developers went ahead and built it anyway, with no legal repercussions to date.

[115] https://kesan.asia/salween-peace-park-initiative/

[116] Article 52 of the Charter sets out that each Kaw "shall be responsible for establishing and implementing rules and regulations, which shall include customary or community codes of conduct," while Article 57 states that, "As elders of Salween Peace Park are the bearers of indigenous knowledge, much of which collectively has been lost to war and displacement, the people of Salween Peace Park shall sincerely value the advice, rules, and policies of the elders."

[117] Indeed, in my professional work as a land rights lawyer, I've found that the strength of local land and natural resource governance institutions very much depends on: 1) The strength of the community's land rights and tenure security overall; 2) Whether the local community legitimizes and accepts the governing body's decision-making power and authority to manage or co-manage local lands and natural resources; 3) Whether larger, state and regional systems validate or undermine the governing body's authority and legitimize or erode its sovereignty; and 4) The strength of "back-up" support from national law enforcement bodies, when the desecrators (illegal poachers/loggers/alluvial miners) are external to the community and thus not within the jurisdiction of local leadership's capacity to sanction and punish, among other factors.

[118] Full exploration of this question is unfortunately outside the scope of this thesis.

4. "Making the basket to put the gift into:" Reviving core aspects of culture and identity

Before they began remembering and reinstating their rituals and ceremonies, most of the groups profiled in the case studies reported reviving central aspects of their culture that had weakened or fallen away over time. Almost every group described a resurgence in the telling of their ancestral stories and origin myths. All four African groups described the profound process of finding and recovering their ancestral seed varieties. The Tharaka and Karen reported bringing back traditional crafts like beadwork, weaving and music, which they are now teaching in schools to youth. The Karen are also reviving traditional hunting techniques and working to interest youth in Karen musical instruments, while the Tharaka are bringing back their traditional medicines and growing medicinal herbs in the school garden. The Dagara recovered their traditional agricultural method of growing trees within the same fields that they grow seasonal crops, restoring moisture to the soil.

The deeper meaning of such efforts is perfectly encapsulated in the story of the Colombian tribe that lost its language, and bears repeating at length. When asked what their most pressing concern was, the leaders of this indigenous group reported that they had to recover their language, as according to their rules, they were not permitted to speak with the Guardians Spirits of the forest in another group's language. Together with Gaia Amazonas, they looked around, and found a group on the Peruvian side of the Amazon that spoke their same language, then sent representatives to that group to learn and study. Von Hildebrand reported how:

> They didn't get their language back, but they got their songs and rituals back, and that allowed them to recover their *identity*….Once they had their rituals and songs, they had recovered enough to be able to go to their neighbours and ask, "Will you lend us your language?" – which they already spoke, because they spoke two or three languages. The neighbours said, "Let's consult the Guardian Spirits," who gave their permission. So now these people could use [their neighbours'] language to speak with the Guardian Spirits….and to conduct all the rituals. So now they have settled back comfortably in a relationship with nature - because they went through a spiritual initiation to use a different language. But first they had to recover their identity enough to get the loan. *Because if you don't have an identity, you can't even ask, because you don't have the basket to put the gift into.*

In order to remember and reinstate their rituals and ceremonies, many of the groups profiled in the case studies had to go through this initiation of first rediscovering and reclaiming their *identity* – the core aspects of what makes them a "people." As mournfully expressed by Sutej Hugu: "The language becomes extinct first, then the culture changes, then the *people* are gone." Indeed, a people are not only a people through blood, but through their shared language, culture, cosmology, arts, songs, stories, and livelihoods. The initiation of "making the basket" may be interpreted as having the dual purpose of both making them more deeply a "people" again, as well as "proving" to the ancestors, spirits and deities their human dedication to walking the path back towards their indigenous spirituality.

Mitambo used this exact analogy: he expressed how the Tharaka community's efforts to revive their culture "brings songs, it brings celebrations, because you speak, and then another person will speak from that. The stories will go and go, and we weave – like as we weave a basket. It is so enjoyable, so organic, so natural, and no one becomes bored. Our discussions bring songs – the songs come. And when they come, they come with spirit."

Cultural revival is also a conceptually easier way "in:" in contexts where one's cosmology has been vilified and branded as "witchcraft," years of slowly telling stories, finding and propagating seeds, singing songs together, remembering rules to protect local biodiversity, and re-learning to sew and weave traditional clothing may be necessarily slow and steady steps on the path towards ritual, ceremony, and communication with the more-than-human world. For, as discussed above, the process

of internal decolonization is a slow one: it takes times and the support of a group to dismantle beliefs (taught to you in school, by organized religions the government, and even by parents) that your own culture is backwards and "uncivilized," its beliefs "demonic." By going the route and remembering what it means to "be a people," the groups slowly built the necessary courage, unity, solidarity and strength to engage with the more-than-human world from a place of profound dignity and pride. (As a counter example, because the Dagara culture was mostly intact and their relationships with their ancestors still strong, the elders of Tanchara could go directly to meet with them, then lay down the curse that ended all mining within their territory).

Of particular note is how *the revival of indigenous seeds and staple foods* was a central priority for almost all of the groups – and with it, food security and food sovereignty. The processes by which the various groups revived their seeds illustrate the profound relationships between humans and their foods, described so eloquently by Argumedo:

> The Quechua people around Cuzco have a word for those species that provide food – *Uyuoi* – which translates sort of as "children," but is more like "what you nurture and has life and is part of your family, your relations"…People consider these species their children, and also consider themselves the children of the plants and animals. Those relations mean not just deep respect, but a connection based on reciprocity that is manifested in ritual.

Likewise, Mitambo explained how:

> What you will find in our tradition is that when we keep seeds we begin to develop relationships with those seeds. These old people kept the seeds because of those particular relationships….So because of these networks of connectedness, I guess that's why those old people courageously kept the seeds. Seeds are given to you when you marry; to start your family you are given seeds. You cannot start life, you cannot start a family without seeds: you can start life without food, but not without seeds. And the responsibly comes through our ancestors, and we are made responsible to take care of those seeds.

The methods by which the various groups have rediscovered and revived their seeds include:

- At the inauguration of the Peace Park, the Karen held seed exchanges as well as exchanges of local agricultural products.
- The Quechua are working with the International Potato Center (CIP), to selectively share their "living library" of potato genetic knowledge; to this end, the Potato Park has shared more than 200 of its 900 native potato varieties with CIP scientists, while the CIP has repatriated roughly 400 varieties to farmers within the Potato Park.
- The Tharaka began searching for their seeds immediately. The elders arrived at the second meeting carrying seeds that they had been safeguarding for decades: four ancestral varieties of millet and five varieties of sorghum. Mitambo described how "this food was there, but in very small quantities, and grown only by the very old people who kept the seeds for themselves….and just grew them in small quantities around their huts."
- To find the Dagara's ancestral seeds, CIKOD held a local competition, offering prizes for the people who brought the most seeds. Describing this, Bernard Guri, the Executive Director of CIKOD said: "You should have *seen* the women – they thought no one cared about their old seeds! We went around the different villages and did this festival [in each village] – and from that we were able to retrieve the local seeds that were getting extinct. The women gave the local names of each seed, and told us about how to cook them, some for food, some for medicines, some for spiritual uses - and through this process, we got all of them back!" To ensure that the Dagara's seeds never again come to close to extinction, CIKOD has been collecting seeds and is constructing a local seed bank, with the plan of making the wide range of traditional seed varieties openly available to anyone in the region who requests them.

- As soon as the Bagungu sacred site custodians opened their meetings to women, these women, whose traditional role has been as "seed custodians," began teaching the group about the names of their indigenous seeds, the different varieties of sacred plants, and the various ways to use those seeds and plants. Bemoaning the loss of their seeds, they started searching among themselves and with elders to see if anyone had been carefully saving old seeds. Their efforts were successful, and, over time, the group's meetings have become impromptu seed exchanges for women to share once-difficult-to-find seeds. Years later, as a result of these efforts, the Bagungu "have revived so many indigenous seed varieties that we thought we had lost." These women now run a shared garden, where people from across Uganda come to tour their garden, share seeds, and learn.
- The Venda *Makhadzi* were also entrusted with being seed keepers for their people. At Domo la Mupo, these elders have spent more than a decade working to find, recover and promote their traditional foods, and as a result have revived a number of almost-lost traditional plants.

While an analysis of these efforts could itself be the subject of an entire dissertation, three points are worth highlighting. First, *recovering a culture's ancestral seeds and farming techniques is a decolonization process in itself*: for decades, colonial and then post-colonial governments urged farmers to forsake their traditional farming strategies; as part of the "Green Revolution" hoards of government-trained agricultural extension workers fanned out into the countryside to "teach" rural farmers how to farm. As a result, many people abandoned their traditional seeds and farming techniques. As illustrated in the Dagara case study, farmers were told to chop down the trees in the middle of their fields that millennia of experience had taught them was the best way to increase soil moisture. Recovering seeds is also an anti-capitalist process, as the new seeds and farming techniques pulled rural farmers deeply into capitalism: whereas before they could make their livelihoods and eat a diverse diet without any exchange of money (including by gathering and hunting much of what their households needed to survive from local wetlands and forests), suddenly, they were enmeshed in the global market systems. For, in collaboration with multinational corporations, governments have persisted in pushing rural farmers to propagate "high yield" seeds that they must purchase, and which necessitate the attendant purchase of both fertilizers and pesticides. Mitambo explains how this went for the Tharaka: "When our culture got eroded…we stopped eating our food, and started planting and eating the conventional foods, like rice, wheat; food that was not grown in our area…And people started saying millet is "too laborious" – because you have to chase away birds who come to eat; with sorghum - the same thing. People stated having a low opinion of our foods and so we started losing our food." Likewise, in Ghana, Guri described how "Our seeds had been lost because the government policy was to introduce 'improved varieties' which reduced the seeds the farmers had access to to only about five kinds of seeds."

A second key point is that by recovering indigenous seeds, cultivated for generations and selected to be best adapted to the local ecosystem, *communities increased their food security and improved their families' nutrition***.** Mitambo described how, as a result of the revival of their ancestral seeds, the Tharaka community has suffered less from hunger than they have in the past few decades:

> Because we are in a dry area, and hunger was prevalent, but now, because we plant foods that are adapted to the zone we live in, people are thriving more than before. Pigeon peas regenerate after the spring rains, and millet, too, regenerates after harvest. The indigenous plants regenerate even when it comes to the other seasons – so we are seeing the impacts of having more food production…people are seeing that our indigenous foods can grow well, and we are less hungry.

Describing the impacts of their work in Uganda, Kagole explained how the Bagungu's ancestral seeds "were so useful and so nutritious, but now, with the introduction of hybrids…we have seen persistent hunger in many parts of this country. These indigenous seeds help to stop hunger and famine because they are nutritious and…give us foods that can be stored in the soil and [so] help us to avoid famine." And in the Colombian Amazon, as soon as the young women started learning from their elders how to garden in the traditional way, "ask[ing] for a loan from the Pachamama, and from the Guardian Spirits," they

started producing twice as much food as they had before, and reported that their children's health improved as a result.

Third, *some of the rituals that the communities revived include or revolve around sacred seed varieties.* In many cultures, humans and plants have the kind of intimate relationships described by Argumedo, and their agricultural practices are deeply ritualistic. Some of the groups profiled in the case studies literally could not begin doing rituals again until they had recovered their ancestral seeds. For example, among the Venda, as Makaulule explained, seeds have their own traditional rules and protocols, which humans must respect; most Venda rituals involve using seeds, including rituals to welcome babies into the world. The most important food crop and ritual seed of the Venda is finger millet, but for generations growing and using finger millet was so discouraged that the *Makhadzi* had to coach themselves through a decolonization process: Makaulule described how, at first, the women had to "do dialogue to equip ourselves as *Makhadzi* that finger millet is the right thing to do – it is not wrong…" Drawing the direct link between reclaiming your ancestral seeds and doing the difficult work of dismantling internalized colonization, she explained:

> What we are doing is decolonization….If you want to do mining, if you destroy *Mupo,* we are standing up. If you say, "Finger millet is wrong" – we are standing up to decolonize the Venda people – to stop the colonial mind in you, to stop the belief that "you will burn in hell if you touch finger millet, or do rituals in sacred sites." We are decolonizing that mind.

For the Dagara, their traditional farming is grounded in ritual; Guri explained how: "For us, food is not just for eating, its also spiritual…We see food in two parts: food that we eat to nourish our bodies, and food for spiritual nourishment. You acknowledge the natural side of the food *and* the spiritual side." Every funeral must have a certain kind of sorghum present; Guri explained how: "If I die, for example, until they produce a head of that variety of sorghum, they cannot start the funeral…you can't have a funeral without it; you need it to do the rituals relating to death. So if you go to a funeral and you look closely, you always find a head of that sorghum is there. For us it is part of our wellbeing – it is not just eating food." Similarly, among the Dagara, before planting crops, "There must be a ritual for the soil, and for the seed, and everything must be done before the farming starts." Similarly, as the Tharaka recovered their seeds, they began reviving their traditional seed-related rituals. Mitambo described how: "When you plant *seeds*, there is a particular way that a seed becomes a seed - in terms of ritual and ceremonies that go with the selection…And this has become one of our central activities: before you set off in the morning, if you are setting off for a journey, you have to conduct a ritual ceremony, and you have to use seeds, as seeds are the centre of everything."

5. Remembering and reviving rituals and ceremonies for the land and sacred natural sites

In two-thirds of the case studies, after a significant degree of internalized colonization had been dismantled and a basket had been woven, the communities began the intimate process of remembering, restoring and strengthening the land-, spirit- and ancestor-honouring rituals and practices at the centre of their traditions. In some ways, this remembering and restoring process was the beating heart of these communities' journeys; all the other strategies elements necessary to ensure that the rituals are not forgotten again, the relationships between humans and their lands never again left to languish, the spirits and ancestors never again left abandoned, unfed and hungry.

Notably, not every community had to do this: among the Quechua and Dagara, and many of the Amazonian tribes, much of their culture is/was still intact, the knowledge and practice of how to intimately relate to the natural and more-than-human world still strong. The Tao, as well, still practice their traditional rituals and ceremonies, even as their language is fading from use and their taboos are flagrantly transgressed by Tao profiting from tourism. For example, when the Tanchara community's lands were at risk of being mined, the elders knew exactly what to do, followed the proper protocols, and worked with the ancestors to lay down an effective curse. Guri explained how, "The elders went and consulted the ancestors…And the ancestors

actually speak to them and give their instructions what to do. So the elders came out with the instructions from the ancestors – an even [the elders] can't change them. They just came out and announced to us the ancestors' instructions."

The various groups profiled in the case studies remembered and revived their rituals in two main ways. In all instances, the remembered ceremonies are by definition not the "old" ceremonies perfectly reinstated, but new versions, adapted and re-created for the current context, given new significance through the remembering process.

First, most pragmatically, the Kyrgyz communities and the one Amazonian tribe who lost its language *found members of a related group who had not lost their rituals, or members of other groups with similar ceremonies, to help them to remember*, then slowly and carefully built upon that help to reconstruct their ceremonies. When necessary, key spiritual aspects were also "borrowed" from another group. The Amazonian group found people in Peru who spoke their same language, then went to study with them, and managed to recover their traditional songs and rituals. In Kyrgyzstan, the group reviving the Kyrgyz fire ceremonies invited openly practicing shamans from the Altai (where the fire ceremonies had continued), to help them recover their own version of the ritual, including: who should lead the fire, how it should be held, what offerings should be made, and other key elements. They also invited shamans from Ethiopia, Mongolia, Kenya, Mexico, Korea, and Guatemala, who maintained their own versions of sacred fire ceremonies, to come share their practices. Cholponai Usubalieva-Grishuk explained that the invited spiritual leaders from around the world "were doing their own ceremonies throughout the day, showing [us] what they do, how they do it, what offerings they give to the spirits, etc." Similarly, the Buryat elder described how: "

> [The spiritual leaders invited were] real spiritual leaders in their own communities and on their own lands, which is why they…came and helped…Because for example, even small details were totally forgotten and were done in wrong ways, but the Kenyans told how it is done in their culture, and it was wonderful for us to hear that; we accepted their advice gratefully, and next time we did it in a different way….It felt right.

Second, *very specific instructions for how to perform long-lost rituals and ceremonies were taught to elders by ancestors in dreams*. When the Tharaka community finally felt able to begin protecting its 38 sacred natural sites, they knew that they could not just go to each site and lay down generalized offerings. Instead, the community had to patiently wait. Mitambo explained:

> When we are doing rituals in a particular sacred natural site, there is particular clan that can do that ritual, and you have to find the right person from that clan; there is a due process that has to be followed and if you do it the wrong way…it might be insulting or disrespectful – because the reason you are doing it incorrectly is because you have not taken the time to understand and to wait for information. So if no one has this information, we have to keep struggling, trying... So we wait, and then eventually one day an elder will come with a dream, and that dream has the answers to everything we were looking for…[For example, from a dream about a particular sacred site] we even learned about how to deal with the concrete that has been put there: you have to go with twigs and animal intestines and pray there, not use metal to remove them… So it's the process of digging deeper, and being patient, to understand and so not do it wrongly, which is dehumanizing. It is the process of getting to the ritual, it is the process of discovering the ritual…. We are invoking many dimensions of sources of knowledge. There was a case where the person who did the last ritual for a certain sacred site died before I was even born. So we had to wait for an elder to dream, and we use the information from that dream now to perform the ritual. So it becomes a process.

This description echoes the process of the Amazonian tribe who lost their language: the Tharaka also had to "go the route," before just jumping into land-honoring ritual. The Tharaka, for their part, had *to first re-build relationships with their ancestors*, then learn from them how to enact rituals correctly.

Mitambo noted beautifully how

> "…Although these rituals have been lost, *the ancestors are still living*, and if we can develop processes that connect us to the ancestors, we will get dreams in which we can get information from them about how we can revive the rituals. The ancestors are not dead: we invoke ancestors, and then get the information in the form of dreams… For when we do things the wrong way, the ancestors will not be happy because we have not consulted them enough. They will simply not be happy. So we have to consult them and consult them so we can do the right thing, in the right way, so that the land and ancestors are happy and see that we are doing it from the bottom of our hearts…. I am saying what I have seen through the process. For when we do the right thing, and the ancestors are happy, they open the path. What is difficult becomes less difficult, and what is not clear becomes clear.

Similarly, in order to restore their culture after being in hiding for decades, the Bagungu's sacred site guardians had to go on very personal journeys of connecting more strongly with their ancestors. Tabaro described how "so many dreams started coming:"

> During these discussions, whenever they introduced themselves, they talked about their ancestors; there was a connection, and I think it called upon the ancestors to come back in their presence. The ancestors gave them the way and the wisdom of how to go back through the rituals. Because after a month, the [custodians] knew how to perform the remaining rituals. [They reported] how the ancestors came back and told them, "You now need to go back and perform these rituals," and they would be told what to do: what seeds to use; they would be told the type of chicken to use; and they would be told the time when to go and do these rituals. So the performance of rituals came back. And of course the women identified the lost important seeds for the rituals' performance…and as the dialogues went on, the custodians started performing those rituals in the sacred natural sites, which they had not been doing for the last fifty years!

Among the Venda, it is common for elders to dream rituals. Makaulule described how, "Even in dreams: the ancestors take you in your dreams and teach you about the indigenous plants found in nature." Venda ancestors also provide clear instructions regarding how to perform rituals; Makaulule explained: "The stage of becoming an elder makes you to become the person to do the rituals….And when you are in that process, you go to sleep and dream, and in that dream [the ancestors] are guiding you, giving you messages." Describing how she walked her path, Makaulule related her very intimate experiences receiving dreams:

> [I walked by] listening to the spirit of our ancestors, because that spirit of our ancestors is *real*. They come in different ways – they can come in dreams, with another force which you cannot know what is it…That is my experience – this is how I can explain it: I listen to the spirits, and when the spirits guide me to go to the forest, I go there, and when the dream comes to me, I take it very seriously. A dream is my compass of direction. I take a dream very, very seriously. And, according to our culture, our traditions, a dream - you need to perform it when you wake up, and when you go on the following day, the following week, the following month, the following time, you walk that dream. That is how I did it. I did it by listening to the spirit, by listening to my ancestors, because I trust the spirit of my ancestors.

If traditional rituals have not been done publicly for generations and the surrounding culture scared and/or condemning of indigenous spirituality, publicly enacting a ritual is a courageous act. Yet, oftentimes, the public nature of a ritual is a large part of what gives it power. For example, when the Tharaka finally received instructions for how to conduct the ritual for one particularly degraded sacred site, they not only went ahead and performed the ritual, but invited the entire community as well as the government officials to witness. Mitambo described how:

> We invited everyone to witness, so they would understand what was being done. People from the

> village came, even the children…You know when you tell people not to do something, it is very theoretical…[but] seeing is believing, so when people see the ritual, it works better…The strategy is to *see* what the elders are doing: they go around with intestines, chanting aloud – it made people scared. What they are doing is actually cursing – they are saying "We are cursing anyone who comes back here to do anything wrong." People fear curses…So when those words are said in the presence of people and they are seeing and hearing it – it is different then when they are told, "This is place is a sacred site." Being told is not enough. But when they hear and see the elders honouring the site and giving very clear instructions: if you go there and anything [bad] happens, don't blame anyone, it is you who have transgressed.

6. Intergenerational education and knowledge transfer

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many of the groups in the case studies are very focused on how to ensure that their children and future generations can learn and perpetuate their language, cosmologies, stories, songs, rituals, ceremonies, and traditional ecological knowledge, and that they are not lost or eroded again. The variety of strategies employed in the case studies include: cataloguing and capturing elders' knowledge; founding schools or educational programs to teach youth; and reviving or creating immersive experiences for young people to experience important aspects of culture and ritual first-hand. As presciently stated by Danil Mamyev: "H*ow* they are educated is *who* they become."

First, various groups are capturing and cataloguing their indigenous knowledge to have it available for future generations when they seek it. In Taiwan, the Tao have meticulously gathered every bit of information that anthropologists have recorded, transcribed or filmed about them for more than a century, and created an archive of knowledge that future generations can look to when seeking to revive any aspect of their culture. They have also made a digital map of Orchid Island, the "*Pongso no Tao* Tribal GIS Database," that includes Tao language place names for every significant place, as well as an "Ethnobiology Knowledge Base" that catalogues the more than 900 Tao People's names for wild animals, birds, plants and marine creatures living within the Tao's ecological landscape. Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan, Gulnara Aitpaeva and her team at the Aigine Cultural Research Centre (ACRC) have spent years cataloguing all 1200 Kyrgyz sacred sites, including their origin stories, meanings, purposes, locations, and the various protocols and practices associated with them. ACRC also systemically researched and documented all pilgrimage routes and rituals across all of Kyrgyzstan. In the Altai, Danil Mamyev and his colleagues are documenting the traditional legends, stories, and epic poems of the region.

Ingeniously, the Colombian elders devised a strategy to both record information before it was lost *and* teach their youth about the depths of their culture; as described by von Hildebrand, when the elders complained that their youth were not listening to their stories or engaging with the elders, they sat together, brainstormed, and decided: "Let's turn them into anthropologists: if they can handle a computer and a tape recorder, let them study *us* and write it up in their language, and then they'll learn it. They will have to learn the songs - and they can write them, tape them, film them, and put them into the computer!'"

This research project proved to be spectacularly successful, and immediately impacted how the youth found pride and dignity in their identify. Silvia Gomez explained how during this research project, for which the young people were paid a nominal salary:

> "All this knowledge became kind of 'cool' for the young people, as [they] came to understand that the more you know, the more powerful you are and the more connected to the land you are, and that became a thing of pride: 'I know my story, I know my origin, I am *Macuna*.' And the elders felt important, too, because the youth were finally asking them what they know…"

The recordings captured by those researchers are now cherished by today's youth, as many of the elders who shared their knowledge have passed away. Gomez recounted how today's children "are still fascinated by the fact of being able to listen to the elders who are no longer there …You arrive in the

community and you see little kids listening to the story of origin that the elder once told, again and again."

Second, many of the groups have either founded schools, claimed control over the local education system and instituted indigenous curricula and ways of learning, or established learning centres where youth can go for extra-curricular education**.** In Kenya, the Tharaka decided to take matters in their own hands, and founded a private school that today has 180 students, who not only learn in the Tharaka language but also engage in outdoor education, where they visit sacred sites, take walks to neighbouring farms where they learn from farmers, go to the river to learn about water, and eat from the school garden, which grows traditional Tharaka foods. They learn to cook Tharaka dishes, and will soon begin learning basic traditional healing remedies, using plants they have been growing in the school's medicinal herb garden. They are also learning traditional Tharaka beadwork, which even the boys want to learn, despite it traditionally being a women's craft.

In the Colombian Amazon, the tribal leaders spent decades reclaiming legal control over every aspect of the governance of their territories. They then designed their own internal education systems, and hired teachers from among their young adults to teach the children in their indigenous languages, rather than Spanish. A key component of their education system is hands-on learning, going out into the fields and forests to learn how to plant or hunt from their elders. Similarly, within the Salween Peace Park, KESAN has founded a school focused on integrating traditional Karen culture into the standard national curriculum, including Karen language, music and weaving skills. As part of this effort, KESAN and Park leadership have spent the past three years researching Karen culture and preparing textbooks for both students and teachers that teach about traditional Karen weaving patterns, musical instruments, hunting tools, and how traditional weddings and funerals are performed. The Park leadership are also planning to revive the traditional Karen education system, which focuses on teaching young people by bringing them directly to the land to work and learn alongside older family members.

On the extracurricular side, in South Africa, Dzomo la Mupo works in thirteen villages and fifteen schools across the Venda region, teaching young people about their ancestral seeds, the importance of rituals, and about appreciation for sacred forests and sacred natural sites. The Makhadzi also hold gatherings, celebrations, and workshops where elders share their knowledge with youth, and lead fieldtrips for youth to spend time in forests or at sacred natural sites. And on Orchid Island, the Tao have afterschool classes that teach Tao songs and stories, and are urging young families to speak Tao as a first language in their homes, to ensure that there are still "mother tongue children" in future generations.

Third, various groups have been devising immersive experiences for youth to experience their culture first hand, through rites of passage and participation in the rituals and ceremonies that connect humans to the land and to sacred natural sites. For example, in South Africa, the *Makhadzi* of Dzomo la Mupo bring young teachers out into the sacred forest to spend the night, requiring them to wake up at three in the morning so they can experience the sunrise. In the Altai, Mamyev and his colleagues have responded to the challenges of trying to work within the Russian school system by building an independent cultural centre and school, the *Tengri School of Spiritual Ecology*, where they run outdoor educational programs that teach indigenous Altai cosmology and traditional knowledge. The centre includes a ceremonial space, traditional standing stones, and places for workshops. And in Kenya, Mitambo and his colleagues are slowly beginning to revive their traditional rites of passage, aligned with national laws and modern times.

C. Ways of being

While the foregoing discussion attempted a typology of *practical strategies*, all of which must involve conscious efforts to dismantle internalized oppression, there are three intangible aspects - or *ways of being* - critical to such efforts. These are: 1) fostering intimacy with the more-than-human world; 2) being open to working in collaboration with ancestors, spirits, deities and other non-human forces; and 3) keeping current, flexibly adapting to the present moment. These aspects are explored below.

1. Cultivating intimacy with the more-than-human-world

As I write this, next to me on my desk are the cobs of maize that I started growing in tiny cups in my greenhouse last spring; every morning this week I have gone out to the garden and harvested a dozen ears, singing and offering tobacco as I snapped each ear down and away from the red-tinged stalks. Unwrapping each one was a revelation of blue and purple jewels, shining in the rain or early morning sunlight. This was my third summer of trying to grow this sacred species from New Mexico so far from its original ancestral habitat, and the first time I have been successful. The years of trying and failing, of singing and praying and getting to know this Corn Being created an intimacy that I could not have ever expected when I was gifted the original seeds. I have come to understand – and know first-hand – why so many of the people interviewed for this research spoke at length about their culture's rituals around planting seeds and harvesting food. Over years, an inter-species relationship of care and generosity – and of deep listening and great gratitude – slowly grows and deepens.

A recurring theme in the interviews – and underlying all the concrete strategies described above, is the very personal process of both living within and cultivating this intimacy. Many of the respondents tried very hard to describe that intimacy to me during the interviews. In Uganda, before they could even begin to revive their rituals, the sacred site custodians spent months simply spending time together in nature, restoring that intimacy. Tabaro explained how: "We would walk and sit near the lake and watch the water, watch the lake as it breathes and talks. They had their nights and days on the lake and in the forest, reflecting and praying." For Tabaro, who grew up in a heavily Christianized community, this intimacy was a revelation; he explained:

> The Bagungu are much deep-rooted in nature, to the extent that all that they do in terms of food production, in terms of fishing, in terms of wilderness conservation; they refer to nature as part of their community. And they look at themselves as one community where there are human beings, and the rest of all other elements in nature – like water, animals, soil, insects – are also referred to as members of that community…That was very exciting to me.

Describing this intimacy at length, von Hildebrand said:

> When we talk about knowledge, you have to talk about intimacy: you need to come to a spiritual level of knowledge, becoming *one* with the knowledge. That is the fundamental aspect of traditional knowledge: becoming one with what you do. And if you don't have intimacy, you don't achieve the spirituality either: it is *through* the intimacy that you become spiritual, and through this your identity grows. The indigenous people say that the worst thing to do is to imitate…You can't imitate: you have to be *one* with something….and from that intimacy you are talking, speaking, acting….Most of [a shaman's] training involves learning from nature by observing nature and listening to it – which is how he can flow with nature and become *one* with nature. So when we are talking about knowledge, and profound knowledge, it is based on intimacy: when you become *one* with nature, that is when you are ready to start understanding. If you have no intimacy, you cannot access the spiritual, which is a very profound feeling.

Speaking of her own re-awakening to this intimacy during one of her first fire ceremonies, Angarova shared how:

> I was in the sacred fire ceremonies with Danil. It was a journey, and a revelation: when I was in front of the fire, I felt the fire spirit. It was an experience, unexplainable in words – we were sitting around the fire, there was a ceremony, and all of a sudden…I was one with it, I understood it – very momentary, very profound…Things started pouring – I got nourished; though my lungs, that medicine of the land was coming to me. I tapped into a different realm of knowledge that I've never had access to before, and I felt like I was finally becoming who I am supposed to be.

As expressed so beautifully by Angarova, the integration of that reconnection and awakening intimacy is deeply moving. Similarly, Lesle Jansen, a Khoekhoe lawyer from Cape Town, described how the

vulnerability of that intimacy can be transformational. She recounted the experiences of her urbanized Khoekhoe community as they moved through the process of reviving their !Nau ceremony:

> You have to understand the context: these are people who were assimilated and given an identity away from their language, way of life, and their livelihood – everything. And they have been living in this form of assimilation, through a "coloured" identity. And for generations, people were not told who they were, what they used to know – and these ceremonies have been their first introduction into a way of remembering. Before ceremony, there is a moment to sit. They go and sit. And they hadn't even yet gone into the kraal where the ceremony is, yet they know. They give reverence to the moment, and…inside, in the ceremony, it's a very personal process they take you through. People cry, they get deeply absorbed in the process…They give a lot of integrity and honour to it; for them, it's a ceremony for them to connect with their ancestors, and people take it very, very seriously…People become quiet in a different way before taking part in the ceremony. There is no real verbal expression given to it, but you can see that people understand that they are going to undergo something. It's a very deep process, which brings most people to tears.

Many of the people working so diligently to strengthen and revive their cultures know that intimacy profoundly, and are genuinely distressed to watch as their children and grandchildren grow up *not* interwoven and interconnected in a web of deeply intimate eco-spiritual relationships. For example, Makaulule described how:

> Today, if I take the children to Krueger National Park, they will see the buffalo, the lion, and the giraffe, but they do not have that interconnection, and they will not see the trees and the insects. Because for them it is about going there and seeing the "Big Five." I don't even know if the teachers who take them there even talk about the totems. That interconnected, holistic relationship of the people with the land has been disturbed. If you only go and see a lion or an elephant because of its power, but with no holistic understanding of the land and the wider ecosystem: that is the impact of colonization. It is how people have been colonized to forsake their interconnections with the land and landscape.

The modern, westernized world *disenchants*, and even people living in relatively rural areas may no longer create the kinds of inter-species intimacy that the Quechua of the Cuzco Valley, for example, place at the heart of their indigenous cosmology. However, the thing about intimacy is that it grows, naturally, not by looking for it, or forcing it, but by staying in connection, and listening, watching, observing, and paying close attention. By making oneself vulnerable and receptive, rather than pushing; by tending to another being or a piece of land over years, until every aspect is known and loved; and by participating in ceremony and staying open to the feelings, visions and experiences that arise. Silvia Gomez, the Gaia Amazonas team member, described her first experience of truly understanding this intimacy:

> We were really trusting the process and the relationships and really listening to them. Which has been forgotten: truly listening, siting down in the *Maloca* for the whole night, chewing coca, smelling tobacco, listening to the stories of origin, and just being there –the true meaning of *being* – without any other objective than being and listening and coming up together with what we should do now…Being in the *Maloca*, one night after not sleeping for three days and having the effects of the coca – being *in* the moment of origin - being *there*, like traveling and being in the moment of origin, and feeling: it's a very phenomenological way of approaching. Not a scientific, rational way, but getting *inside* the phenomenon and letting the phenomenon transform you. We could not understand from the edge if we had not jumped.

Efforts to remember and revive the rituals, ceremonies and indigenous knowledge necessary to protection and stewardship of sacred natural sites must be grounded in such an intimacy - cultivated over time, through deep listening, careful observation, and genuine care.

2. Working in collaboration with ancestors, spirits, deities and non-human forces

A second intangible factor is how various groups perceived that spirits, deities, or ancestors were guiding their efforts or otherwise working together with them in collaboration. Remember that "small stick?" Viewed in another light, that "small stick" that Makaulule talked about is in the hands of the more-than-human world. A few of the individuals interviewed were extremely frank that so much of what transpired, and what they accomplished, was led and guided by ancestors or deities; while as humans they were running around making things happen on the physical plane, non-human forces were directing them, opening the way, or ensuring particular outcomes. For example, in Colombia, von Hildebrand realized:

> So I decided to go and get as much land as we could get…But anyway, the point is that the elders said, "Go and get it, the spirits say do it." And so then I was being sent by *them*, then. They put the energy into me, sending me, protecting me, putting forth that my work would be sweet and that people would listen to me. I can't say I was their messenger, but what I did then carried *their* energy…They put the energy so I could move along the right lines. I was not *at all* aware of that at the moment; it took *years* for me to understand that they were protecting me and guiding me along the way.

And in Central Asia, Angarova described how:

> We did private fire ceremonies with Danil. We devised multi-layered strategies: passports and legislation to protect the sacred natural sites; a protected area approach, working directly with existing protected areas and creating new protected areas; working with the local people on mapping, doing global campaigns to block IPOs; so much work, constantly. But the heart of it was the ceremony – the way Danil described it was, "Galina, we are working in a different realm to stop this pipeline"…When you get to that source of deeper knowledge, you just know, you tap into resources that are not usually available to you, and then *they* inform the course of action.

Indeed, as described above, when they started, many of the people who led the efforts had very little idea where they would end up. Rather, they navigated forward by listening, being responsive, and letting the next "right step" organically arise. Many of the respondents described how this open-ended flexibility allowed the more-than-human world to steer and direct the course of their actions. For example, Makaulule felt as through she was guided every step of the way:

> I was there, available in the forest, having my time, where my ancestors guided me, and got me connected to them. Even though I didn't plan to connect…It is not me who did it, it was Spirit. Spirit guides us…. I never plan. I never had a vision, although people now say I had a vision. I never knew I would be doing this…This path is beyond my understanding. It is beyond your understanding, too: you can understand half of it or less than half of it...

In other cases, the nonhuman world was not only guiding and helping, but also making the major decisions and taking direct action. This is the foundation of governance for the Quechua of the Cuzco Valley, whose governing body are their sacred mountains, elected each year, and consulted for every decision. In Uganda as well, as a result of the sacred site guardians' revival of their rituals, the ancestors and spirits of the land were perceived to have stopped the flow of oil to the foreign companies' oil wells. And in Ghana, Bernard Guri related how: "So the elders just went and did their own consultation with the ancestors, and the ancestors said, 'No, we don't want anybody meddling with our lands.' If you come to my village, the ancestors died hundreds of years ago, but they still have symbols representing them, and the elders still go to consult them…And the ancestors actually speak to them and give their instructions what to do."

In such instances, the mountains, spirits, and ancestors are seen as capable of taking direct action to protect sacred natural sites. In many of the case studies, respondents were clear that humbly collaborating with the more-than-human world has brought significant power and success to their work: as the humans take care of practical human-related tasks (filing lawsuits, demanding FPIC, requiring Environmental Impact

Assessments, etc.), the ancestors, deities, energies or spirits who reside in or are related to those sites are both supporting the humans' efforts *and* working in their own, more intangible ways.

3. Adapting to the present moment, flexibly changing with the times

Perhaps most importantly, as well stated by Baggethun and Reyes-García, "the fact that a specific unit of knowledge is lost or kept by a society is not as important as *whether the society retains the ability to generate, transform, transmit, and apply knowledge."* (Baggethun and Reyes-García, 2013: 646, emphasis added). At the centre of their efforts to remember and revive their customs – and the only way such efforts will succeed over the long term – are the groups' very creative strategies to keep their culture evolving with and adapting to the current moment. For while a culture's "moral code"[119] is perhaps the beating heart of a cosmology or set of practices, that code must be passed on and expressed in a way that resonates with the future generations. As such, a third intangible "way of being" is how well a community gracefully and creatively integrates its traditional culture and cosmology into the modern world of today, holding each simultaneously real and valid, taking the good from both. A culture is truly healthy when its young people are included into such efforts.

Good examples of this are how Quechua farmers and scientists in the Potato Park are using their ancient cosmology to breed new potato varieties that can withstand climate change, or how the elders in the Amazon met their youth where they were – fascinated with modern technology – and stimulated these young people's interest in their culture by hiring them to "research" and document their elders' knowledge using that technology. Describing the necessity of this flexibility, and adaptability, Sutej Hugu very presciently described how cultures have always adapted, but need the space and time to do so creatively:

> For us sacred is: you respect, you observe, you follow the rhythms, the cycles, you adapt, you respect. You say, 'now we are encountering the eternal disturbance.' The tsunami comes, the earthquake comes, the pandemic comes – the rhythm is broken, and actually our ancestors are quite aware, because this is not uncommon for every people in every time…Tribal communities have living knowledge systems connected to the land and seas – an ethics and a relational ontology, and a way of learning new things, as *learning* is very important for Indigenous Peoples…[For example, four or five hundred years ago]…we reached the Philippines and found the silver coin – and then used it to create a whole system of craftsmanship, to make the coin become something totally different: the seal of a helmet to use in our ceremonies. So I will say that every indigenous tradition is a living one. It is kept by the adaptation and innovation of every generation in different situations.
>
> If we can keep our way of connectedness, our way of learning, adapting and innovating, maybe we still can contribute – not to save us, but to have a new way of being that is rooted in an old, ancient way of how we have lived on this planet… [But] our biggest challenge is our younger generation – they are being educated in the modern schools, in modern knowledge, doing business, or becoming government officials – they can do it, but [in modern society] there is almost no time and space to innovate [tradition]. A living tradition should be a living innovation and adaptation by every generation, but now we have no time and no space – so our tradition is abandoned, not adapted or innovated.

Without this adaptation, culture becomes a stale relic, indeed: something to perform for tourists.

Much of this is encapsulated in the idea of Sankofa, a concept and image from Ghana that means "flying forward while looking backwards." As so well-articulated by Hugu, cultures change continually; what is

[119] Reo and Whyte argue that the transmission of moral codes is most important; they write that while knowledge and practices may change due to global trends and large-scale forces, "perhaps part of what is responsible for resiliency amid these changes is the traditional moral code, which may inform selective socio-ecological adaptation." (Reo and Whyte, 2012 at 25)

most important is to bring forward the wisdom of one's culture, hard-earned by millennia of ancestors, while living and thriving in the modern world. This kind of modernity can be seen in even the scientific and technological terminology that the respondents used to speak about ritual and sacred sites: in South Africa, Makaulule noted that "Like amino acids are the building blocks of protein, rituals are the building blocks of our life," while Mamyev in the Altai described how "ceremony is like plugging a flash drive memory stick into the earth."

Inherent in this adaptability is also pragmatism, evident, for example, in the way that the Tharaka are critically reflecting on how they can adapt their rites of passage initiations to align with Kenyan laws against FGM. Discussing this, Mitambo noted how:

> We feel we need to find an alternative within the confines of the law. We are designing a program. We are trying to find a creative way of substituting the cutting; we are talking about shaving [the initiates'] heads…. We just need to see how to make it comprehensive; it should be something inspired by our rich cultural background…[and] filled with the richness of why [rites of passage] were very important to our culture."

Like the Amazonian elders, the Tharaka are meeting their children "where they are" - beginning by showing them the plants that their food comes from, or teaching them not to be afraid of sleeping outside, activities that would never have been part of previous generations' initiations. Yet the initiating *force* remains the same; Mitambo explained: "Nature is the initiator that we have." This sense of flexibility and innovation will likely ensure that such efforts endure, and that the new rites of passage they devise eventually become accepted "tradition" for future generations.

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Finally, it bears noting that a few of the respondents spoke about their culture's rituals and taboos, or their ancestors' curses, as a kind of *etiquette,* a way to show profound courtesy to the more-than-human world. Describing a seasonal fishing taboo of the Tao people, Hugu made the point that:

> This taboo is part of our inter-species compact with the flying fish, what the ancestor of the flying fish taught the Tao people. So we keep this taboo seriously…You can call it a taboo, but it is, for us, the aesthetic of life: you organize your life in a beautiful way, with a bigger vision. So this is more like an etiquette. This etiquette is because of the connectedness, and it is full of knowledge, full of embeddedness.

Indeed, such principles and practices help humans to "organize your life in a beautiful way, with a bigger vision." These taboos and curses are not something to guard against "sin" or misbehaviour, but reminders of etiquette, politeness, and loving consideration of the non-human world and its cycles, preferences and needs. Similarly, Mitambo described how a "cursing" ritual enacted to safeguard a Tharaka sacred site "was restorative; it was trying to *restore* the relationships, and to invoke the spirit of the land for everyone to be more accountable to the spirit of the place. It was not about punishment, but about calling people to be more accountable to the land." Meanwhile, Makaulule described rituals as a kind of governance system, based in gratitude and reciprocity:

> We are the Venda people – we do the rituals, we do the communication with the spirits. I will use an English word to describe this: it is a "governance system" …Ritual is a kind of prayer; you don't just eat food without thanking the Creator. Ritual for us bounds us to say "thank you" as a protocol….I believe that the Creator gave us rituals as protocol and procedures for how to relate to the land, as prayer, as a way to bring you to give back, not just to harvest and take... There must be a governance system. A way of doing. A way of appreciating. A way of supporting, not just taking, taking…

V. Conclusion

Through a qualitative analysis of the case studies, this investigation discerned six practical strategies and three underlying "ways of being" that offer some insight into the question of "How can communities who have lost or are losing the cosmologies, rituals, ceremonies and practices necessary to honour their sacred natural sites remember, revive and strengthen those beliefs and practices?" The six strategies identified include:

1. Courageous leadership and regular community meetings that build trust and solidarity and allow for authentic dialogue that helps to dismantle internalized oppression;
2. Efforts to ring-fence the territory to achieve tenure security and a degree of sovereignty, within which there is greater freedom to govern according to indigenous cosmologies and traditional knowledge;
3. The revival or strengthening of indigenous governance structures that govern in alignment with traditional beliefs, practices, protocols, and knowledge;
4. The revival of core aspects of culture, including seeds, livelihoods, medicine, music, etc.;
5. The remembrance and enactment of ceremonies and rituals that function to protect, care for, and "feed" sacred natural sites and the wider local ecosystem; and
6. The creation of systems and programs that ensure intergenerational transfer of knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews.

Such efforts are most successful when undertaken with three "ways of being," including:

1. Cultivating intimacy with the more-than-human-world;
2. Working in collaboration with ancestors, spirits, deities and non-human forces; and
3. Adapting to the present moment, flexibly changing with the times to keep the culture current.

This typology indicates that to preserve the biodiversity of sacred natural sites, simply setting and enforcing boundaries and mandating rules is not enough: it is also necessary to strengthen and revive the cosmologies and cultural practices that generate the respect for those sites and the wider ecosystems they are situated within. Revitalizing and deepening humans' relationships with the more-than-human world is are key aspects of such efforts; ceremony and ritual are the outward community performance of those relationships.

This typology might be useful for Indigenous Peoples whose cultures and sacred sites are at risk of erosion. Just as Mitambo was inspired by Makaulule's work, who was herself inspired by the Indigenous Peoples of Colombia, it is my hope that by sharing these stories, others may be so inspired. However, such information may not only be useful to Indigenous Peoples, but to *any* group of people who steward and tend to land and sacred sites. There are many places around the world where – although the people living there no longer identify as "indigenous" or believe in their ancestors' cosmologies – land-based cultures once thrived and sacred natural sites were once cared for.

Positively, the sacredness of sacred sites may be a dynamic phenomenon, dependent on the quality of caretaking and the strength of humans' relationships with the associated non-human entities. In Kyrgyzstan, Samakov and Berkes found that while sacred sites lose their sacredness if their governing rules are disrespected, sacredness may be *created* or *restored* by consistent, honoring stewardship. They write: "If a sacred site is neglected, polluted or mistreated, [the spiritual power of the site] leaves that place and that site ceases to be 'special,' i.e. people who go there don't get healed, prayers are not accepted...New sacred sites can emerge; in turn, other sacred sites, which no longer attract pilgrims or become defiled or befouled, can lose their sacredness." (Samakov and Berkes, 2017: 435 and 439)

Likewise, Studley describes how in Tibet: "Although [the mountain deities] are autocratic in terms of governance, they are dependent upon the human beings to *re-enspirit* their domain by engaging in

invocation rituals and liturgies." If such rituals are abandoned, the mountain deities "become displaced and de-territorialised and lose their power, status and authority" (Studley, 2019 at 36). Speaking of her Buryat clan's responsibility to revive its ceremonies, Angarova described this exact phenomenon:

> It is all explained by reciprocity between humans and the natural world. We have lived on this planet for quite some time, millennia, and we've developed that relationship with mother earth…[and] the trees, the plants, have been shaped as a result of our cultivation and care. That is on the physical level. But then on the ritual level, sacred places are not going to exist without people. Because it's the people who make the place sacred. And that is how the place becomes powerful: the more you pray, the more powerful the land becomes. There are not places of power without the people tending to them, feeding them…So that's why as human being we need to take care. We make the sacred sites, together with the spirit beings, because we are connected to our ancestors, and they are also making the energy centres – we and our ancestors make the sacred sites together.

Intrinsic to the idea that sacred sites can be de-spirited or en-spirited by integrous human governance is the hopeful possibility that humans can revive once-sacred sites, or even contribute to the creation of *new* sacred sites.[120] Such efforts may be key to increasing human resilience in the face of climate change. Some research has indicated that reviving indigenous communities' rules, knowledge and practices related to ecological stewardship may not only have positive conservation and biodiversity outcomes, but may also help communities become more resilient as the climate changes. (Mijatović et al., 2013, Koohafkan et al., 2011) Similarly, McMillen et al. (2016) found that strong relationships between people and places become social resources that help to increase peoples' resiliency and capacity to adapt to change. As such, a careful understanding of how groups of people might collectively remember, revive and enact recently- or long-forgotten belief systems, land-honouring rituals, and ancestral agricultural practices may not only contribute to greater biodiversity, but to greater human flourishing as well.

In conclusion, it bears noting that cultures, cosmologies and peoples can never actually be "lost." They live on in our bones and blood, in our dreams and intuitions. Addressing the question of "how can communities remember their traditional ceremonies and rituals?" Jansen, the Khoekhoe lawyer, responded thoughtfully:

> I don't think anymore that the sacred can be lost, because the ancestral spirit continues in all of us. What gets lost are the *containers.* Whatever that medicine is, it is always alive, we just forget how to be in ceremony. So because we lose the form, we think we have lost the content – but we have not. We just need to remember how to contain it. Our ancestors knew how to contain it…It cannot die, it is bigger than us. We have just forgotten the format of how to honour it. But it is always there, and not even capitalism and globalization can kill it.
>
> That's the hope I have now. And that's why people like my community who are living on the Cape Flats: we have lived through every crisis, but we still cry before ceremony. We are remembering, sitting and preparing for ceremony, even though we are not living in the historical way…It's a deep thing, particularly in Cape Town…We live right next to a mountain which used to be ours, but we have to look across to it, we have been forcibly removed from it…and we don't have access to it. It's a national park – but the memory is there, it's all there. It has never gone away, no matter what has happened.

[120] Indeed, Gadgil reports how, after successfully fighting to reclaim ownership and management rights over their forests, the Indian communities of Mendha and Marda recently set aside a portion of their forests as "newly constituted sacred groves," thus imbuing forested areas with new spiritual significance. On their cover of their new management plan for these lands, leaders put a quote from a local elder: "Who owns this forest? Not the government, not the village, nor any of us. The real owners are those not yet born. We are merely custodians, entrusted with the privilege of taking only what we need while leaving the heritage intact for future generations." (Gadgil, 2018)

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

First Interview:

- Does land need people?
- How do you see the relationship between people and their ancestral lands?
- How do communities get disconnected from their ancestral ways/traditions/ ceremonies?
- Have you seen people *reconnect* to land, then tend to it better/more sustainably? What elements are part of that reconnection?
- Are ceremony and ritual important to stewardship of land? If yes, how or why?
- Can communities remember lost or currently unpractised rituals, ceremonies and ways of honouring sacred lands, sites and species? How?
- Can you tell me about your own efforts to: a) protect sacred natural sites; b) support community-driven conservation; or c) revive local/indigenous practices, knowledge and beliefs regarding human stewardship and care of lands, waters, forests, etc.?
    - What was your first step? How did you know to take that step? What happened after that? And after that? How did you know what to do?
- When people reconnect to the land, what heals? Does the community heal?
- Does *the land* heal when people protect sacred sites or revive ceremony? How?
- How to ensure that the landscape is not only conserved and protected, but that the culture maintains the kind of relationships that inspire them to protect and properly honour their lands?

Subsequent Interviews:

1. Who was part of the central team leading this process? How were community members driving the journey?
2. Did the community make any efforts to ensure inter-generational transfer of their knowledge and cosmology?
3. Generally, how can people remember aspects of their culture that have been lost or suppressed? How do you help people remember how to care for sacred lands? How do you take people from a place of fear of rituals/ceremony to claiming their heritage?
4. Were there any ecological or environmental impacts of your efforts?
5. Were there any cultural impacts of your efforts?
6. What were the impacts of doing this work on your own life and your own understanding?

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