

# SACRED LANDS: WHEN THE ORDINARY BECOMES SACRED

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"You shall be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.  
Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations;  
You shall be called Repairer of Broken Walls  
Restorer of Streets and Dwellings."  
Isaiah 58:11-12

## Introduction

The obvious intent of this biblical command is to encourage the continuity of a culture by rebuilding what their ancestors had created. Today we might imagine a more up-to-date deity commanding: "Get thee a big bulldozer, level the site and build anew, and you shall be called good developers." Our industrialized approach to efficient site preparation, building construction and agricultural practices obliterates the past, both in fact and in the collective mind. When seen to embody a covenant from the past, evidence of ancestral presence, including the cultural landscapes one's ancestors helped to shape, can possess the power to bind a people together as a culture, a society, or a civilization. The following two case studies emphasize the point.

## The *Acequias* of Northern New Mexico

Irrigation channels or ditches known as *acequia*, built by the first Spanish settlers, crisscross northern New Mexico and southern Colorado where they function for the most part as they always have. The word *acequia* is from Arabic and refers to the irrigation system engineered by the Moors during their occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. Regulation of the North American *acequias* involves legislation that from the onset established committees composed of farmers across designated segments of watersheds. The original Spanish *Acequia* legislation simply became part of American law during the territorial period, and much of those statutes remain today as they were written, in the original Spanish. The task of the committees is to decide when farmers can irrigate and how much water each may draw from the *acequias* that cross their land. Part of each *acequia* committees' ultimate responsibility is to adjust to how much water may be drawn from their part of the system, with the intent to insure a sustainable and fair use of water across the entire watershed.

In 1990 an organization known as the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA) was formed to facilitate an exchange of common interests and concerns across all the watersheds. Especially, it serves to provide legal council to the *acequia* committees, pooling their resources against assaults by developers and wealthy ranchers who want to usurp the water rights of small traditional farms. This movement goes hand in hand with a parallel movement to preserve the seed stock of small farm holdings across the region. The intent is to perpetuate varieties of seeds that date from as early as the beginning of the Spanish Colonial period—that is, seeds that evolved in response to the specific conditions of micro-climate and soils over the past four hundred years or so. These indigenous seeds, often referred to as heritage seeds, are under assault by large agricultural conglomerates such as Monsanto, who produce engineered seeds that are nominally effective for one season only, and so must be renewed each season through re-purchase from the supplier. And their acclimatization is not specific to the micro-climate and soil conditions of specific places but rather to broader climatic and soil conditions of large areas of the Southwest.



Acequias in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado. [photos by N. Crowe (left, below) & courtesy of Wikipedia (above & right)]

Each year the NMAA holds a congress in Santa Fe, known as the *Congreso de las Acequias*. Delegates to the *Congreso* carry a vial of water from their community's *acequias* to be blessed at the beginning of the *Congreso* by a priest in a ceremony known as the *Bendición de las Aguas*. In this symbolic act, the water that nourishes their land is addressed as sacred, and by extension, the system of *acequias* itself.

The NMAA has established what it refers to as The Declaration of Core Values. There are ten of them and I will cite a few here, in abbreviated form, to demonstrate the connection between water, sacred landscape, and community:

1. We honor the connection between water, land, life, and communities. We believe that our *acequias* express the values of our culture and our identity as a land-based people. . . .
2. For generations, the well being of our communities has been sustained by sharing for the benefit of the common good, a tradition known as *repartimiento*. . . .
3. We view water as a *don divino* or divine gift from God and as a common resource that sustains all life . . . .
4. Water rights should remain connected to the *acequia* to nurture agricultural traditions, to replenish aquifers, and to support the green ribbons of life along our rivers. . . .
6. The worldview that treats land, water and food as commodities threatens the continued life of our communities. . . .
8. We believe that our ability to grow our own food with the water from our *acequias*, the lands of our families, and the seeds of our ancestors, makes us a free people . . . .

9. We believe that our *acequias* will remain resilient by remaining rooted in centuries of traditions<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Stone Field Walls of Central Honduras**

The Lencas tribe are a mountain agricultural people whose ancestors built stone fences, or field walls, across hundreds of miles of the mountainous terrain of Central Honduras. Although often found in an eroded state, the walls remain today as reminders of the industry and skill of early Lencas farmers. A member of the tribe, Carlos Vasquez, has been working along with others of his tribe to rebuild, repair, and restore field walls in the vicinity of Las Mesitas, Honduras.<sup>2</sup> Their intent is to remind their fellow Lencas of their heritage and common culture, through restoration of their cultural landscape.



Stone field walls near the community of Las Mesitas, Honduras [photos courtesy of Carlos Vasquez]

Hundreds of miles of those stone field walls configure the land across mountainsides, valleys, and ridges—sometimes overgrown, sometimes scattered roughly along where they once stood, and sometimes remarkably intact, still enclosing fields and marking property lines with their presence. The earliest walls date from the 1600s, their purpose from the onset to mark the boundaries of fields and prevent farm animals from foraging crops. In addition, the walls facilitate terracing to prevent erosion of steeply sloping land and to provide reasonably level ground for crops.

Vasquez recalls his grandparent's account of leading "mules loaded with corn and beans . . . through the south alleys that ran parallel to the length of the stone fences from community to neighboring community, to barter for other products. These very fences and their accompanying

alley ways which extended through multiple neighboring communities, defined our way of life . . . [while the] alleys were . . . used for pilgrimages to distant locations and helped people to communicate with other people."<sup>3</sup>

Today, economic development is of critical importance to the Lenca, and among the first considerations is the construction roads. Because road building could spell major destruction of the walls themselves, Vasquez sees as a first priority impressing upon planners that the system of roads must be organized in concert with the existing cultural landscape. It is a two-edged sword: Maintenance of the system of walls, and consequently maintenance of the character of the wider landscape, is important to the cultural identity of the Lenca. At the same time, a lack of economic development is itself a destructive force to cultural pride and social cohesion. The solution therefore must be one of careful design—incorporating a system of roads in a way that supports the pattern of existing features rather than running counter to them, the roads thereby conceived as integral to a harmonious landscape.

### **Sacred Landscapes and Sustainable Land**

These are rather random examples of the human quest to find sacredness in things and places. The extent, degree, or intensity of "the sacred" is in proportion to its role in a given circumstance. Sacredness, as I use the term here, is not an absolute or fixed quality, nor must it be integral to the inherent structure of a religion.

What can we learn from these examples? First, from the biological perspective of human evolution, the sense of the sacred is an integral part of human nature and its presence in the human condition has to do with the preservation of things important to the sustainability of a people, and beyond that, the preservation of cultural diversity—which is not un-related to the importance of ecological diversity in the stability of an ecosystem. Second, while it is difficult for modern industrial societies to recognize and support the sense of the sacred, even when and where we can see that it reinforces cultural and social identity and upholds sustainable patterns of land use, we must override modern practices that would negate its effects.

### **In Conclusion**

The modern world, with its normative modernist mode of thinking and short-term focus on the most efficient means to generate wealth, obscures a natural sense of the sacred and its ancient (and equally un-quantifiable) counterpart, the idea of Harmony. Former societies thought it their responsibility to adjust their actions and artifacts, especially their built environment, consistent with what they believed to be in harmony with nature. Vague as such a concept may be, and as anachronistic as it may sound, perhaps we need to reintroduce it into our way of thinking, alongside and in competition with the quantifiable judgments we have more lately come to live by.

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<sup>1</sup> Quita Ortiz, "New Mexico Acequia Association Celebrates 20th Annual Congreso", *Green Fire Times*, Santa Fe: December 2010, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Vasquez, Carlos, "Preserving the Cultural Landscapes of Historical Rock Fences: Indigenous Heritage Constructions in Central Honduras", An unpublished paper written for the graduate seminar entitled, "Introduction to Historic Preservation and Regionalism," in The School of Architecture and Planning, University of New Mexico, 2009; N. Crowe, Instructor.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, Vasquez Paper.