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Practical Spirituality and Sacred Mountains

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ABSTRACT

This paper has three parts. The first part will summarise two decades of personal research in the fields of high altitude archaeology and anthropology of sacred mountains and provide an overview of the multiplicity of ways in which mountain cultures in the Americas, Oceania, Europe, Africa and Asia have interacted with the landscapes that they perceive to be sacred. In the second part some of the connections between modern mountaineering and spirituality are explored. This will be followed by identification of values shared by native communities and mountaineers in different parts of the world, by analyzing the transformative potential in the experience of mountains and their sacredness.

Keywords: Sacred mountains, archeology, mountaineering, indigenous, transformation.

Introduction

The INDUSTRIALIZED WESTERN civilization has been trained to look at mountains merely in connection to the resources that they offer to the humans: the various minerals, the glaciers as reservoirs of water, the forested slopes as providers of timber, and the enriched agricultural lands at their feet. Occasionally, beyond their role as providers of material resources, mountains become objects of esthetic contemplation, sources of artistic inspiration, winter playgrounds or places of relaxation where urban dwellers can find some peace of mind. However, these are not the only ways in which mountain landscapes have been perceived historically and geographically. If we transcend the modern western perspective, we will notice that in most

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parts of our world, and virtually throughout the history of mankind, mountains have been seen in a much deeper light.

As a matter of fact, mountains have been looked upon as sacred. The universal sacredness of mountains has been acknowledged in a diversity of ways, according to the different cultural frames and religious systems involved. In the first part of this paper, I will summarize nearly twenty years of personal research in the fields of high altitude archaeology and anthropology of sacred mountains, in an attempt to provide an overview of the multiplicity of ways in which mountain cultures in the Americas, Oceania, Europe, Africa and Asia have interacted with the landscapes that they perceive to be sacred. In the second part of the paper, I will explore some of the connections between modern mountaineering and spirituality. In the discussion, I will seek to identify values shared by native communities and mountaineers in different parts of the world, by analyzing the transformative potential in the experience of mountains and their sacredness. Traditional societies have long been aware of this, but the industrialized world is only starting to explore and acknowledge the role of mountains in modern practical spirituality.

SACRED MOUNTAINS AND NATIVE SPIRITUALITY

For an entity to be perceived as sacred or numinous, it has to show aspects that are, on the one hand, appealing and fascinating, as well as attributes that are considered threatening or dangerous. Mountains fascinate the observers with their majesty and beauty, causing a particular feeling of exaltation in those who can climb them to their summits. At the same time, mountains are feared for the dangerous thunder and snow storms, the hurricane winds and the volcanic eruptions that prevail in the higher elevations. These ambivalent qualities turn the mountains into sacred entities that become the object of deep religious veneration (Ceruti 1999).

Mountains in the Himalayas have been for millennia the abode of Hindu deities such as Shiva and his consort Parvati, who are known to dwell blissfully on the summit of mount Kailash. Shiva is the aspect of the Divine that embodies Transformation, with Brahma being the Creator and Vishnu the Preserver of the universe. Mount Kailash remains one of the principal places of pilgrimage in the Eastern world, which is respectfully circumambulated by thousands of Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims every year (cf. Bernbaum 1990). Many other Himalayan peaks are identified as embodying the ideal of Mount Meru, which is also projected upon numerous temples throughout India and Thailand (cf. Ceruti 2014).

Himalayan mountains are traditionally perceived in Bon

Shamanism as the hideout of mountain demons, which Buddhism has tamed and transformed into "guardians of the Dharma." It is under their protection that Tibetan Buddhist monks have built their inaccessible monasteries or *gompas*. The Sherpa people in Nepal will refuse to climb Khumbila, the most sacred peak in the Khumbu valley; but if proper rituals are performed they will agree to join mountaineering expeditions to climb other higher peaks, such as Everest. Interestingly, Nepalese Buddhist lore has obscure references to the mysterious location of sacred valleys or *beyules* that are accessible only to those spiritually evolved. In these hidden valleys amidst the mighty Himalayan peaks, ancient wisdom is to be preserved in times of turmoil.

In ancient Europe, mountains were traditionally believed to be dangerous places haunted by elves and witches; as it is still the case in remote rural areas of the British Isles and the Basque country (Ceruti 2011). Legends about giants in the Alps and *gentiles* in the Pyrenees share similarities with the Scandinavian folklore on the fabled trolls. In circumpolar areas of Scandinavia, the Sami people acknowledged the sacredness of mountains as places of offerings and as otherworldly destinations visited by the *noaide* shamans in their séances (Ceruti 2009, Eliade 1974, Haetta 1994, Kleppe 2008).

In the Mediterranean world, the Egyptians built pyramids in the shape of mountains and later turned to burying the mummies of the dead pharaohs in underground chambers excavated inside the mountain of Thebes (Ceruti 2010a). In the island of Crete, the so called "peak sanctuaries" were built atop prominent rocky outcrops in view of the majestic palaces of the Minoan civilization (Ceruti 2013a). In the Greek *^eninsula*, lofty peaks such as Olympus were conceived as abodes of god Zeus and the other anthropomorphic deities in the Greek *Dodekathemon*. In ancient Italy, Etna and Stromboli were conceived as the workshops of the deformed deity that the Greek named *-ephaistos*, and whom the Romans called Vulcano.

For millennia, a singular reddish monolith the size of a mountain has been used for sacred purposes by Aboriginal communities in the deserts of central Australia. The rock art panels in the caves at the foot of Uluru have kept clues of the transformative knowledge that the Anangu elders have passed to the youths during their ceremonies of initiation into adulthood (Ceruti 2007a). The Moth Hunters would also initiate their boys into manhood at the *bora* grounds built on top of the sacred mountains of New South Wales (Flood 1996). Last but not the least, the rocky outcrops and rock art sites in the Northern Territory of Australia can only be understood in the light of the ancestral knowledge encoded in the aboriginal stories of the

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Dreamtime (Ceruti, 2007b).

The mountains of Polynesia are covered in layers of symbolic meaning which enhance their sacred status. Hawaiian mythology abounds in cautionary tales about the volcanic goddess Pele, whose unpredictable moods account for the erratic pattern of the lava flows in the Big Island (Ceruti 2010d, Westervelt 1998). In historic times, the Kahuna priests in the island of Maui would spend months atop the caldera of mount Haleakala to absorb the *mana* or spiritual power from the volcano (Glen 1999, Kalakaua 1990). In Easter Island, the volcanic craters filled with freshwater are thought to be "eyes that look into the sky": Rano Raraku became the quarry of the giant stone carved *moais* and Rano Kao provided the location of a ceremonial village built for the ancient cult of the Bird Man (Ceruti 2012a). The Maoris in New Zealand have coined the concept of *whakapapa* to define the intimate connection between human genealogy and volcanic landscape (Stafford 1997; Reed 1999). In the early days, upon arrival into the islands of Aotearora, the ancestral Maori navigators would climb the highest volcanoes to claim land for their descendants. Nowadays, when formal introductions are required, the Maoris will still name the sacred mountain to which they feel connected prior to giving their own name (Ceruti 2013, Bernbaum 1990).

In the Andes of South America, mountains were originally worshiped from a safe distance: in southern Patagonia, the Tehuelche people used to revere the granite spires of Torres del Paine and Chalten, which they considered to be "mountains of terror" (Ceruti 2012b). The Mapuche shamans have always played their sacred drums invoking the spirit of the volcanoes of northern Patagonia to grant them power to perform healing and propitiatory rituals (Echeverria 1988). An important transformation took place five hundred years ago, when the Inca civilization became the first in the history of mankind to climb to the highest peaks in the Andes and build mountaintop shrines on their summits, facing the extreme high-altitude environment and trespassing the barrier of fear that the colossal summits inspired to the Andean inhabitants. The Inca mountaintop shrines crowned volcanoes and snowcapped peaks in Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina, contributing to the sacredness of the geography of the Andes (Ceruti 1999, 2008a and 2010b).

The shrines built on the highest mountains of the Andes marked the remotest frontiers of the Inca Empire and subdued the peaks into the Sun cult sponsored by the Incans. Not only were the Andean summits provided with religious architecture, but also they were consecrated as ceremonial stages where human sacrifice would occur and where sumptuary offerings would be buried (Bray et al. 2005,

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Ceruti 2004 and 2005). High altitude archaeology has demonstrated the complexity of the mountaintop Inca burials in the Southern Andes, with frozen mummies of children having been found on many peaks, including mount Ampato, Pichu Pichu, Sara-Sara, Misti, Chani, Quehwar, Chuscha, El Plomo, El Toro and Llullaillaco, the highest archaeological site on the planet (Ceruti 2003; Reinhard and Ceruti 2010). Scientific studies have brought light into aspects of the life and death in times of the Incas (Previgliano et. al. 2003; Wilson et al. 2007; Reinhard and Ceruti 2006). The role of children as mediators with the mountain deities is still acknowledged in different ways, including the worship of naturally mummified children in the cemeteries of western Argentina (Ceruti 2008b).

The legacy of the ancient Inca mountain processions is alive among the Andean pilgrims to the glaciers in the Peruvian Sierras during the festivity of the Lord of the Star of Snow (Ceruti 2008c). This traditional mountain pilgrimage, oriented to the retrieval of sacred ice, has been affected significantly by the retraction of glaciers caused by climate change. Andean devotees are making remarkable efforts to adjust to the new conditions and to refrain from collecting large chunks of ice, and carry melt water instead.

Indigenous tribes in Central America still keep legends about ancient human sacrifices offered to the active volcanoes of Costa Rica (Ceruti 2010f, Zelendon 2007). During the post-classic period, the highest volcanoes of Mexico were climbed by Aztec priests to perform rituals of self-mortification and blood offerings. The shrines on mounts Toluca and Iztaccihuatl were located at relatively lower altitudes than their Andean counterparts (Ceruti, 2012c). Aztec ceremonies often involving the sacrifice of children, took place on the summit of Tlaloc, a mountain named after the Aztec deity of rain, although no human remains have been found by the local high altitude archaeologists (Montero Garcia 2004). Nowadays, the cult of the sacred volcanoes is part of the ritual affairs of the weather conjurers known as *graniceros* (Glockner 1996).

The American Southwest is rich in cultural manifestations developed around the Kachina mountain spirits that dwell atop San Francisco Peaks. Kachina masked dances and dolls are part of the living heritage of the Hopi and the Pueblos, descendents of the ancestral Anasazi (Ceruti, 2010e, Dutton 2000). Native American tribes in the Rocky Mountains, such as the Arapahoe, the Black Feet and the Stoney or Assiniboine have traditionally used mountain peaks and glacier valleys in the context of their transformative spiritual experiences known as "vision quests" (Hirschfelder and Molin 2001). During vision quests, the candidates are known to "cry for a vision"

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of the auxiliary spirits that are meant to guide them through their adult lives (Bernbaum 1990). Athabascan groups in Alaska and the Yukon, as well as their distant relatives the Apaches, have symbolically linked mountains and their spirits to the puberty rituals of the girls (Hirschfelder and Molin, 2001). Last but not the least, the so-called "transformation stories" are widespread in the mythology of the Kwaikiutl, the Tlingit and many other coastal groups among the First Nations in the Pacific Northwest (Kew and Goddard 2004, Ruddell 1995).

MOUNTAINEERING AND PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

Modern mountaineering can also be understood in the light of practical spirituality. The physical ascent of mountain peaks can contribute to the spiritual evolution of human beings in ways that are seldom experienced otherwise. The mystical aspects of climbing are more likely to be grasped when the ascents are undertaken in the context of a conscious communion with nature.

Essentially, mountain climbing is not about glorifying the climber's ego, breaking records, gambling with death or competing with other climbers. It is about stepping into the unknown, answering a call, reaching out for wholeness and bringing peace to our restless hearts. After all, mountain climbing is a quest and every mountaineer is a seeker, in his or her own particular way.

As a high altitude archaeologist I have ascended mountains for the explicit scientific purpose of studying the summit shrines of the Inca civilization. Nevertheless, that was not the only reason: there has always been a visceral spell that the mountains have casted upon my heart. In the beginning I tried to ignore it, because it seemed inappropriate to have those feelings towards the "object of research," according to the positivistic and materialistic views prevailing in Argentinean anthropology. Nonetheless, after my first ascents to peaks above 5000 meters, I could no longer hide the transformative impact that the climbs brought at a personal level. The passion that I felt for the mountains would lift me to their summits and keep me "at their feet," all at once.

In no time I found myself doing something I had never done before (and which I did not even know I was capable of), which is writing poetry. Poems became an outlet to the love of mountains and a means to compensate for the aseptic academic writing in my archaeological reports. My first verses were collected in a book entitled *Mystic Mountains* (Ceruti 1998), which I started after my second time on the summit of Aconcagua, the highest peak in the western hemisphere. Academic writing also became more embedded in

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spirituality: I did not hesitate to include an epilogue entitled "the gateway to mystical archaeology" in my second scientific book about the sacred summits of northern Argentina (Ceruti 1999).

Although mystical approaches to mountain climbing are becoming more common these days, mountaineering has traditionally been perceived as a sportive or adventurous endeavour, divorced from any conscious spiritual practice. One early exception is found in the Romanticist novel about mountain climbing as a spiritual quest entitled "Mount Analogue." Sadly, the piece remained truncated by the untimely death of the young writer, Rene Daumal, who succumbed to tuberculosis. Another example is George Mallory's cryptic reply to the question about his reasons to attempt a climb to Mount Everest. The zen-like purity of his famous words ("Because it is there") has withstood nearly a century of miscellaneous interpretations and quoting.

Experiences in the world of sheer walls and lofty peaks often took elite mountaineers beyond the intellectually constrained perceptions of their times. This is immediately noticeable in the writings of French climber Gaston Rebuffat, who passed away in 1985. His book *Starlight and Storm* (1999) is a masterpiece of mystical mountaineering. It was originally written in 1953, in times of institutionalized competition between European countries to conquer the highest summits of our planet as a symbolic prolongation of the war. Climbing above the nimeties of his day and stepping away from the usual military jargon associated to mountain exploration, Rebuffat exquisitely merged a manual of climbing techniques with a poetic account of six of his best ascents in the Alps. He insisted in portraying mountain climbing as an act of communion with nature and mountaineering as a sublime experience to be shared with friends. He became one of the most influential and inspirational authors in the history of mountain literature.

Tyrolean climber Reinhold Messner is considered to be the best mountaineer of all times. Reaching the summit of Everest without Oxygen and solo; walking across Antarctica unsupported and climbing all the peaks above 8000 meters are some of the things he did for the first time in history. His introspective books do not dwell in romanticized descriptions of the mountains, but they clearly demonstrate their importance to human development and fulfillment (Messner 1989 and 1991; Messner and Gogna 1980). In his book about "The Big Walls", Messner describes the "soothing white loneliness" experienced on the high mountains as a door to freedom. He believes that: "*we must be prepared to give each one of our dreams a chance to succeed*" (Messner 1978:141) and is concerned about the under realization of

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the bodily and emotional resources, which he describes as a "cancer of the soul."

"*These mountains, to me are the Beloved,*" said St. John of the Cross nearly four hundred years ago. I am sure that many mountaineers today feel that these words could be their own.

DISCUSSION

In the paragraphs above we have reviewed the fact that prominent mountain climbers of our times have ended up using mystical phraseology and images to describe their personal experiences on the peaks. In the previous section we have demonstrated how traditional rituals and beliefs about sacred mountains in different corners of the world have contributed to the pool of practical spirituality, as well as to the understanding of the landscape around us. In the current discussion we will explore mountains as instruments and scenarios of human transformation.

Sacred mountains and the process of climbing are inextricably linked to inner transformation, which should not be understood as a synonym for mere change. Transformation is often led by intuition or inspiration and manifests as a process that takes place "inside-out;" unlike change, which can be triggered by external agents and manipulated for ulterior motifs.

The values of patience and tolerance are essential to any transformation. Transformation cannot be reduced to a mere project. Goals and deadlines are not part of the transformative rituals that the aboriginal men of Australia undertake in the heart of their sacred mountains. The young Native Americans do not know how long it is going to take to obtain the spiritual vision that they are seeking. Additionally, transformations should not be disrupted: the metaphor of the caterpillar and the butterfly is eloquent at this level, inviting us to consider the damaging effects that external interventions might introduce if attempting to fast-forward the process by forcedly opening up a cocoon.

Individuality and spirituality are inextricably linked in the process of transformation. While globalization attempts to distract our attention towards "changes" at the social, economical and political spheres, we should keep in mind indigenous traditions, religious experiences and mountaineering. They all converge to demonstrate that genuine transformations begin necessarily at the individual scale: it is the individual human being who undergoes a transformation when becoming in contact with the sacredness and the overwhelming power of the mountain. A young man or woman, transformed by the initiation rituals or other spiritual experiences, will thus become a

mature member of his group (even a shaman or a religious leader) capable of working effectively for the well-being of his or her people.

Values for practical spirituality are promoted by the "transformational folklore" that is kept alive among mountain cultures in different parts of the world. Social values such as consideration and generosity are promoted in the moral of diverse transformation stories: from the unsociable trolls or giants that become petrified at sunrise, to the greedy hunters in the Pacific Northwest who are supernaturally turned into rocks or peaks. Alternatively, when reflecting upon the topic of transformation, modern mountaineers have sometimes made the obvious (yet oftentimes unnoticed) point that is not the mountain that becomes transformed during the ascent, but the climber himself or herself. Both lines of thought eventually lead to the same point of insight.

Mountain climbing calls for sacrifices, but the spiritual wisdom that the summits bring will make every effort worthwhile. Of course this notion was taken to the extreme in the case of the human sacrifices intentionally performed by the Aztecs and Incas on their sacred mountain peaks half a millennium ago. However, even ancient rituals that we deem unacceptable today may have something to teach to us, if understood in the proper light (cf. Taylor, 2002). At least we have to acknowledge the faith, devotion and selflessness of those who would give up what was most precious to them, for the survival of their communities. We should cultivate the same compassionate understanding towards the human lives that are still lost on mountaineering accidents, yet make our best effort to prevent those tragedies from happening in the future.

Many traditional rituals on mountains require endurance and strength. The physical efforts of modern mountaineers are not unlike those of the Andean devotees who march on pilgrimage to their mountains of destination. Andean people's practical spirituality is deeply rooted in the contact with the sacred mountains and thus it is worthy of deep admiration. Also remarkable is their willingness to allow modifications in their rituals, such as refraining from removing large pieces of ice in order to prevent further damage to the glaciers that are already affected by climate change. When considering the popular religiosity of mountain cultures in Latin America, we should also acknowledge the prominent role that they have always assigned to their children as mediators with the realms of the mountain spirits (Ceruti 2010c).

In the industrialized world, mountains become destinations where people "recharge their batteries" while taking a break from the pressures of their everyday lives. Motivations to go to the mountains

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include: "to get away from it all," "to escape the rat race" as well as "to take it all in" or "to become alive again" (Cooper 1995:10). Another quote by Reinhold Messner reminds us that "the most important thing is the awareness that mountains give us, allowing us to see the world anew" (Messner 1978:140).

Modern experiences of a spiritual nature that occur in connection to mountains are similar to those that have been described in ancient times, since mountains have always been considered a privileged place to become embedded in wisdom and new perspectives. In Polynesia, the sacred volcanoes are the scenarios where the *kahuna* priests and Bird Men would undertake months of spiritual retreat in order to empower themselves. In the Himalayas, Tibetan Buddhists believe in remote valleys and peaks that become places of refuge in times of unrest. The construction of Buddhist monasteries or *gompas* on the heights of the Himalayan valleys is rooted in these beliefs.

FINAL WORDS

Sacred mountains are "highways" to human development and spiritual realization. They have often played important roles in practical spirituality as places of power, destinations of pilgrimage, altars of sacrifice and places of refuge. All over the world, traditional societies have encouraged their members to overcome their fears and sharpen their intuitive skills during initiation rituals, religious ceremonies, pilgrimage and spiritual retreats that take place on elevated terrains. There are many different ways to experience the sacredness of mountains, and native practices have often contributed to the spiritual awakening and realization of the individuals involved.

Modern mountaineering can also be understood in the light of practical spirituality, and not simply as a competitive sport or an extreme adventure. A hidden spiritual dimension is revealed in the tangible transformations that take place within the heart of modern climbers, as well as in contemplative souls that are confronted to the beauty and majesty of the peaks. An individual who has been transformed by the experience of visiting or climbing a sacred mountain acquires new tools and enlarged perspectives to see the world and act upon it in a truthful and enlightened manner. Since every human being has a heart, everyone has the potential to experience spiritual transformation triggered by mountains.

Our post-modern globalized society is depriving human beings from traditional opportunities of experiencing inner growth. Contact with sacred mountains is limited by technological invasion and mainstream overprotective tendencies. Among the numerous obstacles that are becoming a threat to practical spirituality in connection to

Nature we have to mention technological alienation, nature deprivation, bureaucratization, superficial diversion, irrelevant information and unnatural equalization. They lay at the root of the widespread confusion and psychological frustration that seem to prevail amidst many members of our industrialized communities. It would be hard to ignore the link between these conditions, and the surge of cancer and addictions, including the unnatural dependence on medical drugs.

Mountains are physical metaphors of unity, since the diversity of landscapes on their slopes finally gives way to the uniqueness of the snow on the summit. As we do not expect mountains to "change" in order to resemble other mountains; humans should not be expected to modify their beliefs and actions just for purposes of social adaptation. Transformation is not about acquiring certain external qualities; it is about allowing an inner identity to bloom into realization.

Spiritual transformation can be compared to a climb, as a process of elevation from diversity into unity, in which people with different backgrounds are inspired to move to higher levels of realization, where there is more room for mutual affinities and understanding. The mountains can appear to be more or less accessible, but on their higher slopes and summits, the snow is always white.

Rather than trying to enforce specific changes on the economical or social spheres, we should be climbing mountains and transforming our own hearts. As young Native Americans at "crying for a vision" at the mercy of a mighty peak, we should overcome our fears and pray together for the love that may inspire us jointly. The future of mankind is an uncertain but fascinating ascent.

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