

Sacredness and the Desecration of Nuvatukya'ovi

By Scott Thompson

From Second Mesa on the Hopi Reservation you can make out the ghostly outline of Nuvatukya'ovi, or the San Francisco Peaks, 75 miles to the southwest across the tan expanse of Great Basin desert. The center heights in these mountains curve into a bowl and sharp lower peaks frame the higher ones on either side like guardian deities.

Nuvatukya'ovi has long been sacred to the Hopi. A true rendition of its skyline was found on the walls of a kiva in an ancestral Hopi village dating back to 800 CE. (Peter Nabokov, *Where the Lightning Strikes*, 2006, p. 137.)

Deep within Nuvatukya'ovi lies the sacred kiva of the Kachinas. These mountains are their home from July through February, and the clouds that gather around the peaks are one of the forms the Kachinas take. (pp. 138-139).

In the spring they come to the kivas in Hopi villages. According to Nabokov the Kachinas "serve as messengers between this temporal world and the timeless cosmic forces. Two or three hundred strong, each identified by individual regalia, style of movement and distinctive voice, the Kachinas control all good things. For the betterment of the Hopi people, Kachinas mediate between the way things are and the way they ought to be, reminding young and old how to hew to the Hopi Way, chastising in endlessly amusing fashion those who fall short. The company of Kachinas also includes dead Hopi. Hence, the clouds and the Kachinas and their ancestors flow back and forth through one another." (p. 139.)

Wupatki, when the pueblo cultures as we know them today began to emerge by utilizing the traditions that preceded them in novel ways. It could be that the Kachinas left their sacred kiva in Nuvatukya'ovi to come to the kivas at Wupatki. I suspect that the visionaries there described this process in vast detail, before the Kachinas entered the kivas of the Hopi, perhaps in the 14th century.

Five hundred years down the road, as the conquering Anglos studied the graceful slopes of Nuvatukya'ovi, they perceived nothing sacred. That's no surprise because the only sacred mountain in the Anglo religious culture, Mount Sinai, cannot be seen or walked upon because nobody knows where it is.

We lost our sacred lands a long time ago.

Being a good ole country Anglo myself, I think that as a group we relate to landscapes in two ways: certainly for recreation, which has complex definitions, but most of all for mingo economic development. To tell you the truth, I think turning land into money is our real religion. And that includes what's in the land.

Not that we don't have other religion, but that happens in an altogether different realm we call Heaven, which is conveniently located so that it doesn't block out economic activities on Earth. (I'm not saying that religious views



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For the Hopi the Kachinas may have always been on Nuvatukya'ovi. From his professional standpoint, archaeologist Stephen Lekson speculates that the Kachinas first appeared in the 11th century Mimbres pueblo culture in central-western New Mexico. And that they appeared in the pueblos of Chaco Canyon in northwest New Mexico in the last decades before that culture's fall in circa 1130 CE. As Lekson says, "I have heard Hopi accounts that at least some aspects of ritual life did indeed originate at Chaco." And that afterward the Kachinas came to Wupatki pueblo, the ruins of which lie 20 miles northeast of Nuvatukya'ovi. (*A History of the Ancient Southwest*, 2008, p. 331, n111.)

The 12th and 13th centuries were a time of cultural ferment, especially at

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The net result of which is a perpetual open season on landscapes. Therefore let's see how economic development has hammered Nuvatukya'ovi.

By 1930 the population of Phoenix, 150 miles south of Nuvatukya'ovi, was over 48,000 and growing fast. To keep that expansion going the Anglos thought, We need weekend recreation for those folks. So, per Nabokov, "...the Civilian Conservation Corps cleared an access road [on Nuvatukya'ovi] and erected a timbered lodge to attract downhill skiers to a 777-acre bowl between two of the Peaks." (p.139.) By 1950 the population of Phoenix was over 106,000

and growing fast. To keep that expansion going the Anglos thought, Now it's time for easy access. And so, per Nabokov, "As lift cables were erected in 1958 and 1962, word got around and more visitors showed up." (p. 139.)

By 1970 the population of Phoenix was over 581,000 and the metro area was metastasizing. The Anglos grinned and thought, Now we can make serious money off those sun-baked folks. So, per Nabokov, "A decade later the U.S. Forest Service reviewed plans from a new entrepreneur, Northland Recreation Company, to expand their Snow Bowl [ski] operations. After more public hearings and back-and-forth revisions, Northland was licensed to build a new day lodge and three additional lifts and to widen and pave the road so that five times more skiing enthusiasts could use the slopes." And as you'd expect, "...the all-white Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce meeting in the Ramada Inn at the southern feet of the Peaks, was elated at the prospect of more tourists pounding their sidewalks." (pp. 139-140.)

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What did not enter the Anglo equation (what a shock) was the devastating impact on Hopi spirituality of economic development on Nuvatukya'ovi. As the chairman of the Hopi tribe said in 1983, "If the ski resort remains or is expanded, our people will not accept that this is the sacred home of the Kachinas. The basis of our existence as a society will become a mere fairy tale to our people." (p.140.)

A Hopi named Emory Sekaquaptewa explained how and why this was a desecration: "...it was his people's songs and prayers that had made this home of their Kachinas the closest outward visible symbol they had of 'a perfect mountain with perfect beings in their perfect balance with each other.' Untouched by the imperfections human beings might lay on the Peaks, they provided daily proof of such perfection as well as the inspirational model, reinforced for the Hopi by their Kachinas, in how to live properly. But if Sekaquaptewa saw new lodges and trash bins and Day-glo vests and heard the grinding of ski-lift gears and shouts of patrons in line for hamburgers, he argued that this 'spiritual satisfaction' would become impossible. 'I have a right,' he insisted, 'to believe in the things I have been taught to believe in and this should not be interfered with.'" (p.141.)

For influential Anglos entrenched in their support of the Snowbowl ski area there were two things in what Sekaquaptewa said that were impossible to accept. First, that human interaction with the wildness of the land is, for the Hopi, necessary to the process of spiritual purification. That would mean that great expanses of undeveloped, untrammled land are necessary for robust human spirituality, even where they're in the bulls-eye for development. Second, that maintaining a balance between wildness, the spiritual beings that are part of that wildness, and observant Hopi people is essential for the well-being of all three. That would mean that unilateral human control of the natural world will inevitably lead to catastrophe.

Which is exactly what's happening.

But there's more: "...a forest ranger asked [a Hopi], 'Just show us on this map which parts of the mountain are sacred so we can protect them.' And...the Hopi answered, 'How can we point on a map to a sacred place? The entire mountain, the land surrounding the mountain, the whole earth is sacred.'" (p.141.)

For the Hopi, as for indigenous people generally, there is ultimately no such thing as fragmenting land into sacred and secular parcels. ALL of it is sacred and must be thought about and cared for in that way. Which means that in their view, basing an entire value system upon slicing land into privately owned parcels as we do is delusional. In addition, indigenous religion is all about striking and maintaining a balance between using and preserving finite resources; basing spirituality first and foremost on the reality that resources are finite.

While many write off such a paradigm with a smirk, quipping that it's quaint and ill-suited to the civilized world of hard-boiled business and the acquisi-

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