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.)

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.

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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 mongo 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 about Heaven aren’t healing or true.)

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 seri-
ous 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 hear-
ings 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 expand-
ed, 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 des-
cration: “…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 moun-
tain 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, untrammeled land are necessary for robust hu-
man spirituality, even where they’re in the bull’s-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
ting 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 strik-
ing 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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