

ORIGINS FROM WIND CAVE (WASHUN NIYA): SACRED SPACE AS CONTESTED TERRITORY

JESSICA GARCIA FRITZ*
FEDERICO GARCIA LAMMERS**

Resumo: O estudo sobre Espaços Sagrados no Ocidente é baseado numa ordem construída que fundamentalmente não é parte da ordem "natural" das coisas - escalas geológicas e territoriais existem para lá da percepção espacial construída da sacralidade. Esta percepção é afetada pela relação entre espaços sagrados e a origem de povos e culturas por todo o mundo. O presente artigo tem como objetivo explorar a relação entre espaço sagrado e territórios contestados no contexto da criação do mito do Povo Lakota no território do Dakota do Sul.

Palavras-chave: Espaços Sagrados; Lakota; Wind Cave; Território Contestado.

Abstract: The western study of Sacred Spaces is based on a constructed order that is primarily not a part of the "natural" order of things – geologic and territorial scales exist outside of the constructed spatial perception of sacredness. This perception is affected by the relationship between sacred spaces and the origins of people and cultures across the world. This paper will explore the relationship between sacred space and contested territories in the context of the creation myth of the Lakota People in the territory of South Dakota.

Keywords: Sacred Spaces; Lakota; Wind Cave; Contested Territory.

* South Dakota State University. jessica.garcia-fritz@sdstate.edu.

** South Dakota State University. federico.garcia-lammers@sdstate.edu.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of western architecture, sacred space has become synonymous with constructed spaces or markers that have laid claim to a sacred site. Typologies such as Christian cathedrals and Islamic mosques commonly exemplify constructed sacred spaces; less common in the western study of sacred spaces, however, is a study based in a constructed order that is primarily a part of the “natural” order of things. Geologic spaces that exist at territorial scales typically remain outside of the constructed spatial perception of sacredness. While constructed sacred spaces are rooted in narratives made physical by people, geologic sacred spaces are simply rooted in narratives. These narratives drive the relationship between sacred spaces and the origins of people and cultures across the world. For Lakota people, who live in present-day South Dakota in the north-central United States of America, a clear sacred narrative developed around a geologic space. Washun Niya, or Wind Cave, is the subterranean sacred space from which humans first emerged. When Lakota people first spoke of their origins, they spoke of a small hole in the ground from which the wind blew. While a sacred hypothetical underground was understood to exist beyond the hole, no one could have imagined the one-square mile of cavernous space that actually existed below the ground. As this geologic space was further explored by non-Lakota people it became a part of a contested territory. Indeed, questions arose in regards to ownership, but questions also pertained to the application of sacred space. How can sacredness be applied to a (geologic) space if its physical extents have not yet been determined? What are the implications of sacred spaces that are not identified by constructed or iconographic means of narrative expression? This paper will explore the relationship between sacred space and contested territories within the context of the origin story of Lakota people.

ORIGINS

In Lakota culture, oral narratives establish histories that are passed from generation to generation. The Lakota origin story or emergence story varies from band to band, though the emergence from Washun Niya (Wind Cave) remains the same. According to the story, humans emerged from a place in the underground in order to inhabit the earth. The following version stems from the Cheyenne Creek community on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation as told by Wimer Mesteth to Sina Bear Eagle¹:

¹ MESTETH, 2016: 1.

This story begins at a time when the plants and animals were still being brought into existence, but there were no people or bison living on the earth. People at that time lived underground in Tunkan Tipi – the spirit lodge – and were waiting as the earth was prepared for them to live upon it. To get to the spirit lodge, one must take a passageway through what the ancestors referred to as Oniya Oshoka, where the earth “breathes inside”. This place is known today as Wind Cave, referred to in modern Lakota as Maka Oniye or “breathing earth”. Somewhere, hidden deep inside this passageway, is a portal to the spirit lodge and the spirit world.

There were two spirits who lived on the surface of the earth: Iktomi and Anog-Ite. Iktomi, the spider, was the trickster spirit...Anog-Ite, the double-face woman, had two faces on her head. On one side, she had a lovely face, rivaling the beauty of any other woman who existed. On the other, she had a horrible face...Anog-Ite filled a pack with buckskin clothing intricately decorated with porcupine quills, different types of berries, and dried meat. She then loaded the pack onto the back of her wolf companion, Sungmanitu Tanka. When the wolf was ready, Iktomi led him to a hole in the ground and sent the wolf inside Oniya Oshoka to find the humans...Once there, the wolf told the people about the wonders of the Earth’s surface and showed them the pack on his back. Most of the people stayed with Tokahe (the leader of the humans), but all those who tried the meat followed the wolf to the surface.

The wolf led the people to the lodge of Anog-Ite. Anog-Ite invited the people inside... she soon taught the people how to hunt and how to work and tan an animal hide. This work was difficult, however...they began to freeze and starve. They returned to the lodge of Anog-Ite to beg for help, but it was then that she revealed her true intentions...The people didn’t know what to do nor where to go, so they simply sat on the ground and cried. At this time the Creator heard them, and asked why they were there. They explained the story. The Creator said, “You should not have disobeyed me; now I have to punish you.” The way the Creator did that was by transforming them- turning them from people into great, wild beasts. This was the first bison herd.

Time passed and the earth was finally ready for people to live upon it. The Creator instructed Tokahe to lead the people through the passageway in the cave and onto the surface. On the surface, the people saw the hoof prints of a bison. The Creator instructed them to follow that bison. From the bison, they could get food, tools, clothes, and shelter. The bison would lead them to water. Everything they needed to survive on the earth could come from the bison. When they left the cave, the Creator shrunk the hole from the size of a man to the size it is now, too small for most people to enter, to serve as a reminder so the people would never forget where they came from.

This narrative evidences an origin rooted in the underground. While other versions differ in the way humans emerged, like Albert White Hat’s version in



Fig. 1.
Opening to Washun
Niya (Wind Cave)
with scaled figure for
reference.

which the earth swallowed her children to shake and cleanse the earth² the location of emergence always remains: Washun Niya (Wind Cave). Unusual though, is the tangible, physical opening that delineates the emergence (Fig. 1), while the underground world remains unknown.

In Paha Sapa (Black Hills) of South Dakota, versions of the origin story clash with the settling of Paha Sapa (Black Hills) by Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century. These two intersecting histories fundamentally shape and misshape the meaning of sacred space. These histories affect the present link between political and geological territory. In the middle of this contested battleground is Washun Niya (Wind Cave). With the western expansion of the United States, the former nomadic life of Lakota people and their sacred association with the landscape dwindled as American Indian lands within the United States were compacted into reservations. As a result, Washun Niya (Wind Cave) extended from the small, breathing opening into a vast geological formation that today works as a staple of tourism.

POLITICAL TERRITORY

The basis of the relationship between American Indians and Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century United States stemmed from disagreements over religion,

² WHITE HAT, 2012: 1.

hunting, and productive land. For Lakota people, these disagreements began in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase. Under President Thomas Jefferson the United States acquired lands on which numerous Indian Tribes resided. In 1815, the United States began the process of moving Indians from the eastern United States to western lands³.

In South Dakota, a series of treaties and battles between the United States government and American Indian tribes reinforced this complex relationship. For example, the Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868 established boundaries for Lakota people with the concept of an “organized tribe” in mind. This was a Euro-American construct foreign to Lakota culture. In 1868, the Great Sioux Nation was officially established and Lakota people, or the Sioux as they were identified by Euro-Americans, were further confined.

Within the context of sacred space, these treaties provided an important foundation for how sacred space was interpreted and politicized. Within the larger context, the area known as Paha Sapa (Black Hills) was guaranteed to Lakota people through the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. However, the sacredness of the entire territory was brought into question especially as Paha Sapa (Black Hills) became desirable to miners. This was in spite of the sacredness of specific sites within the Black Hills. Linea Sundstrom describes this in her observations:

New groups entering or reentering the area recognized the sacred sites of their predecessors and often adopted them as their own. Thus the question of whether the Lakotas “had time” to develop religious traditions about the Black Hills reflects a naïve view of culture change. Both the Lakotas and the Cheyennes placed old religious traditions into new (or renewed) contexts as they entered (or reentered) the Black Hills area. Rather than having to invent such traditions, the Lakotas recognized and adopted the religious traditions of those who preceded them in the area. Myth structures permitted the reconciliation of old traditions to new places, as well as the adoption of new beliefs. Whether this was a process of borrowing new traditions or renewing old ones, the result was a complex sacred geography⁴.

Sundstrom’s reference to the «naïve view of culture change» is significant when considering the role and conception of sacred space. Lakota people encountered problems with evidencing the sacredness of Paha Sapa and Washun Niya for three reasons. First, no physical record was kept of the location of sacred sites. Though no drawings or writings existed that explained the location and sacredness of a specific site, oral narratives did exist. As a result, treaties emerged as the first

³ WILKINS, 2007: xxxxi.

⁴ SUNDSTROM, 1997: 206.

Fig. 2.
Map of South
Dakota with current
reservation borders
(solid white lines)
and Paha Sapa or
Black Hills (dotted
white lines).



physical record that identified American Indian Land although they were not always accurate. Second, these oral narratives vary from band to band and even person to person. This is the nature of oral narratives and traditions; they are evolving fluid methods of documentation. However, Euro-American settlers and even the United States government interpreted these narratives as nullified myths. Finally, sacred spaces were never marked through a physical intervention. For example, constructed architectural space was used to mark the birthplace of Jesus (Church of the Nativity) and the ascension of Mohammed (Dome of the Rock). However, Lakota people saw sacred sites as ever evolving. The geography was the physical intervention made by the creator and it did not need to be marked nor disturbed.

Because of these cultural perceptions, Paha Sapa (Black Hills) was slowly encroached upon. Starting in the 1870's, one-thousand men led by General George Armstrong Custer investigated reports of gold in Paha Sapa (Black Hills). They searched the entire area for gold and eventually found a fortune in places like Deadwood and Lead. The gold rush hit a peak from 1876-1877 as men claimed land that belonged to Lakota people. Battles such as the 1876 Battle of Little Big Horn were fought between Lakota and Euro-American soldiers⁵. Unlike Lakota oral traditions, several anti-American Indian sentiments were recorded during this time by authors and journalists. One author, Richard Dodge reflected on the time by writing, «Native American entirely lacked morality and were something less than human, and the theme of The Black Hills was the need to get the area into the hands of whites who could extract wealth from the natural resources wasted

⁵ WILKINS, 2007: 86.

under Indian occupation»⁶. Dodge foresaw ranches, cities, and tourist hotels moving into the territory as soon the “miserable nomads” could “be got rid of.” In 1877, at the peak of the battle and the gold rush, the United States Congress responded to the battles by cutting off rations to Lakota people and ceded the Black Hills to the United States. The Lakota people literally lost their place of origin Washun Niya (Wind Cave) to the government (Fig. 2).

GEOLOGICAL TERRITORY

In addition to no physical records, evolving narratives, and no physical way to mark the sacred space, a fourth condition presents itself before the Lakota argument for sacred space. In all origin stories, the physical sacred space is referred to only as the small opening that breathes. What then comprises the sacred space? Is it the opening? Is it both the opening and the cave?

While Lakota people spoke about the hole that blew air, no story existed of anyone entering the cave. It was a Euro-American hunter who made the first recorded discovery in 1881. According to John W Bohi «Although it seems quite probable that various Indians must have come across the small natural opening to Wind Cave during the centuries of prehistorical habitation of the Black Hills area, the first real discovery, that is recognition of the opening as something unique and interesting, occurred only with the arrival of permanent settlers»⁷. In Bohi’s mind, the Lakota people never truly discovered Wind Cave. Instead, the discovery was attributed to two Euro-American brothers, Tom and Jesse Bingham. According to the documented discovery, Tom and Jesse were hunting and as Jesse was following a deer he heard whistling. He followed the whistling and saw grass blowing on a windless day. His brother and he discovered an eight by ten inch hole in the rocks through which the wind was blowing. They marked the hole and continued to hunt. This is how Washun Niya came to be called Wind Cave.

Shortly after, Jesse and Tom returned to the cave, opened an entrance next to the natural opening, and built a log house over the opening. What ensued was a series of investigations and explorations made by locals including Charlie Crary, who squeezed through a narrow hole and used twine to mark his route, as well as Odo Reder and family, C.H. Walker and family, and Miss Parker, who were the first party to camp in the cave.

⁶ SUNDSTROM, 1997: 186.

⁷ BOHL, 1962: 365.

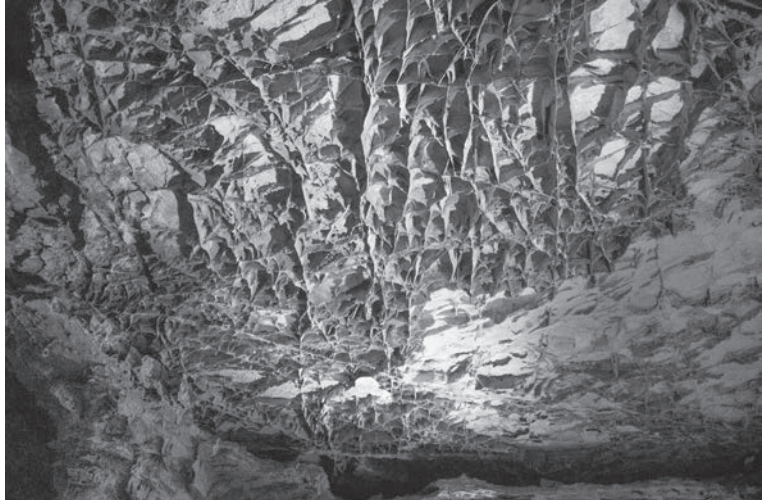


Fig. 3.
Box Work Formation
in Washun Niya
(Wind Cave).

This moment of discovery coincided with a point in history when a shift in aesthetic inquiry occurred. In *Notes on the Underground*, Rosalind Williams explains, «before the eighteenth century, aesthetic inquiry was clearly understood to be part of metaphysical and moral philosophy. The central aesthetic problem was to define objective properties that make an object beautiful»⁸. In the western world during the eighteenth century a shift occurred in the aesthetic experience from beautiful objects to sublime nature. The sublime simultaneously terrifies and pleases us to produce astonishment, resulting in delightful terror. This marked a shift in the scale of what was considered beautiful; a shift from small objects to vast landscapes. Poets and artists began to describe and paint sublime settings. Images of the sublime included mountains, oceans, and open skies. Of course the ultimate form of the sublime was darkness as it denied a visual connection to the landscape and invoked a sense of terror through the unknown. Therefore, the underground became the ultimate example of the sublime as it exemplified the transition in aesthetic inquiry. «Thus cave tourism began as a deliberate quest for sublime experience»⁹. Throughout Europe and Britain, middle and upper classes descended into the underground in order to seek the sublime. This type of tourism carried into the Americas.

As beautiful stalactites and stalagmites were discovered in Washun Niya (Wind Cave), the cave became a tourist destination. Eventually, the cave became the discovered home of the largest network of Box Work in the world. As calcite

⁸ WILLIAMS, 2008: 84.

⁹ WILLIAMS, 2008: 86.

deposits filled between other minerals and these minerals dissolved away, the calcite remained as a veined network in the cave. People came to Washun Niya (Wind Cave) to see these formations (Fig. 3).

In 1886, after the Bingham left, the South Dakota Mining Company laid three mining claims on the land. Gold was intended to be searched for in the cave. In April 1890, the company hired Jesse D. McDonald to manage the property. «It was with the arrival of the McDonalds that the era of serious explorations and exploitation of Wind Cave begins»¹⁰. A homestead was built around Wind Cave and guided tours by candlelight were conducted. John's son, Alvin explored most of the cave and he kept a detailed diary of his discoveries. In his diary he mentions an "opening up" of the cave through dynamite blasts as well as the names he gave to each of the rooms he discovered, the estimated measurements of the spaces, and the recorded chief routes.

As tourism increased at Washun Niya (Wind Cave), the US Department of the Interior took notice. In 1903 the United States Government designated Washun Niya (Wind Cave) as Wind Cave National Park. Ultimately the appropriation and expansion of land, which began in 1815 led to the displacement and disregard for the sacred space of Lakota people. According to Lakotas and to some extent archeological evidence Lakotas have always lived in the area surrounding Paha Sapa. Many historians and politicians claim Paha Sapa and Washun Niya were not sacred to Lakotas instead arguing that the idea of sacredness was used as a means to reclaim land in the twentieth century. The territory became contested and continues to be a place latent with conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of Washun Niya (Wind Cave) highlights a displacement of cultural origins. Through intentional misreading, ignoring, and the appropriation of sacred space Washun Niya (Wind Cave) became a contested territory. Since the 1890's it has been discovered that Wind Cave expands one square mile under the surface. It is the first cave to be designated a national park anywhere in the world as well as the seventh longest cave in the world.

In spite of these discoveries, the bounds and limits of Washun Niya (Wind Cave) continue to be unknown. When Lakota people discovered Washun Niya, they only marked the entrance as sacred. Does the extension of the cave through subsequent discovery diminish the sacredness of the cave? When spaces, like

¹⁰ BOHL, 1962: 370.



Fig. 4.
Cathedral Room
in Washun Niya
(Wind Cave).

the Cathedral Room are discovered, should they also be categorized as sacred spaces (Fig. 4)?

While occupation and land ownership are deeply tied to the historical role of sacred space across Europe, it is less true in the Americas. Evidence of the occupation of various periods can be seen in built structures and fortifications throughout Portugal and Spain. This is most evident in the construction and occupation of sacred spaces such as cathedrals and mosques. In the Iberian Peninsula, the territorial tension and geopolitical history is embedded into constructed artifacts that are clearly architectural. In the Great Plains of the United States, occupation is visible at a territorial scale. Sacred Space is typically measured through the limits of constructed physical space.

In a sublime subterranean world, dark, and limitless, it becomes difficult to discern where the sacred space starts and where it ends. The perceptual and physical limits of sacred space are brought into question. In a church or mosque, walls, a roof, a vault, etc. define the space. Perceptual limits of the space are defined through the spiritual dimensions of sacred rituals.

Therefore, conclusions stem from the meaning attached to the landscape and geological constructs that exist outside of the imposed human order. They lie in the application of sacred space rather than the construction of sacred space. Sacred space does not need to be built; it simply needs to be documented or represented in order to occupy the narrative framework of different cultures. With Washun Niya, the method of representation, oral narratives versus written records, led to the contestation of sacredness.

Ultimately what makes Wind Cave sacred is the Lakota Origin Story. Lakota relatives inhabited these spaces while underground. Therefore, the underground

though physically unexplored is also sacred. As we discover these spaces, we discover the spaces lived in by Lakota and human relatives. There is simply no constructed evidence to marvel at, which also made the displacement of culture and the appropriation of sacred territory simple for the United States government. The future of sacred space that occupies this contested territory largely unfolds through narrative.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BOHL, John W. (1962) – *Seventy-Five Years at Wind Cave: A History of the National Park* – «South Dakota Department of History Report and Collections», vol. XXXI. Pierre: State Publishing Company, p. 365-468.
- MESTETH, Wimer (2016) – *Wind Cave: The Lakota Emergence Story*. «National Park Service U.S. Department of Interior». Available at <https://www.nps.gov/wica/learn/historyculture/upload/Lakota-Emergence-Story-Accessible-for-website.pdf> (accessed on 03/11/2016)
- PALMER, Arthur N. (2014) – *Wind Cave: An Ancient World Beneath the Hills*. Hot Springs: Black Hills Parks and Forests Associations Wind Cave National Park.
- SUNDSTROM, Linea (1997) – *The Sacred Black Hills: An Ethnohistorical Review* – «Great Plains Quarterly», vol. 17, no. ¾ (summer/fall). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, p. 185-212.
- WHITE HAT, Albert (2012) – *Creation Story*. «Teachings & Health Class, Lakota Studies Department, Sinte Gleska University». Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-wM3XYIQ4c> (accessed on 04/01/2016)
- WILKINS, David E. (2007) – *American Indian Politics and the American Indian Political System*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- WILLIAMS, Rosalind (2008) – *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

