

Indigenous Wisdom in a Culture of Peace

Marie-Danielle Samuel, Yachay Wasi - 9 February 2007

Adapting to a Culture of Peace is to change what has been accepted as normal human behavior during these past centuries of conflicts and environmental degradation and to reevaluate the purpose of life.

In this regard, Indigenous peoples have a lot to contribute with their example of pursuing a steady and constant way of living, which has survived centuries.

In Machu Picchu, on November 12, 2003, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated:

“Here, amidst the peaks of the Andes in Peru, the enormous contributions of indigenous peoples to human civilization are everywhere on display — from the sacred ruins of the Inca empire to the crops that grow on the mountainsides. In the jungles of the Amazon too, indigenous communities have lived for millennia in harmony with the rainforest, and they continue to do so today.

And, throughout Latin America, one sees the extraordinary diversity of indigenous cultures and the potential contribution their knowledge and values can make to poverty eradication, sustainable agriculture, and indeed to our concept of life. From here in Peru to the Philippines, and from the deserts of Australia to the ice-covered lands of the Arctic circle, indigenous peoples have much to teach our world.” *1

Mr. Annan refers to “Our concept of life”. It seems that this concept of life today is that human beings can do just whatever they want without regard to consequences, that nature must be dominated and that the Creator, God or whatever name given, is dependent on human beliefs, not a reality that should be taken into account in every moment of our lives.

Indigenous peoples’ “concept of life” was, and still is, directly opposite: they act with the welfare of the forthcoming seventh generation in mind, they consider themselves caretakers of the earth and they respect and integrate the reality of a Creator in their daily lives.

Indigenous spirituality or religion has been put down over the centuries. Considered pagans by various conquerors, Indigenous Peoples’ wisdom has been ignored until recent years.

The United Nations has taken the lead in acknowledging and assisting Indigenous peoples during the past thirty-five years and more recently by the establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2001.

On December 10, 1992, during the launch of the 1993 International Year of the World’s Indigenous People, leaders from twenty Indigenous communities around the world addressed the General Assembly.

One of them was the late Thomas Banyacya, the last interpreter of the Hopi nation, who fulfilled his mandate by telling their prophecy “to the leaders of the world in the House of Mica”.

Indigenous representatives are now actively participating in various international meetings from the UN Commission on Sustainable Development to the World Intellectual Property Organization Intergovernmental meetings.

UN agencies have put Indigenous issues as a priority on their agendas.

Today, during the second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous communities and their supporters, are hoping that this forward thrust will continue with the adoption by the General Assembly of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Symbols of Indigenous spirituality are sacred sites such as the mountain Mauna Kea in Hawaii, World Heritage sites Machu Picchu in Peru and Uluru-Kata Tjuta in Australia but also lesser known places in various Indigenous communities around the world.

For years, Indigenous peoples have demanded recognition and protection of their Sacred Sites.

These demands were acknowledged in some way over the past 10 years:

First, in the United States of America, on May 24, 1996, the White House issued President Clinton's Executive Order on Indian Sacred Sites, which asks Federal Agencies to "accommodate access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites by Indian religious practitioners and avoid adversely affecting the physical integrity of such sacred sites." *2

Then, the attempt by Indigenous representatives to establish a consultative body for UNESCO World Heritage:

In 2000, as the 24th session of UNESCO World Heritage Committee was meeting in Cairns, Australia, a parallel Forum of Indigenous Peoples requested that the World Heritage Committee facilitate the establishment of a World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts (WHIPCOE). This Council would work with UNESCO World Heritage Centre in order to assure the respect, protection and good management of World Heritage Sites sacred to indigenous Peoples.

During the year 2001, an Indigenous Working Group worked with UNESCO to achieve this goal. *3

In November 2001, my NGO Yachay Wasi was invited by UNESCO to participate in the last workshop of this Working Group in Winnipeg, Canada.

The workshop progress report and summary were presented during the 25th session of the World Heritage Committee in Helsinki, Finland in December 2001. *4

Unfortunately, UNESCO World Heritage Committee "did not approve the establishment of WHIPCOE as a consultative body of the Committee ... but it encouraged professional research and exchange of views on the subject." *5

Following this decision, Yachay Wasi organized a Panel Discussion on World Heritage from an Indigenous Perspective at New York University in May 2002. This event took place during the historic first session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and featured as speakers the Director of UNESCO NY Office and an Officer from UNESCO World Heritage Centre in Paris.

Another speaker that day was a representative of the Secretariat on the Convention on Biological Diversity, CBD for short.

CBD Conference of Parties for years has included Indigenous representatives in its discussions, recognizing the importance of traditional knowledge toward the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

In February 2004, the 7th Conference of Parties adopted the Akwe: Kon Voluntary guidelines for developments taking place on sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied by indigenous and local communities. Akwe: Kon means "Everything in Creation" in the Mohawk language. *6

In June 2005, CBD collaborated with UNESCO in organizing an international symposium in Tokyo, Japan entitled: "Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes".

One speaker at this symposium was Parshuram Tamang from Nepal, member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. In his welcome, he stated:

"I feel proud to say that Indigenous peoples are making concrete contributions to global, cultural and biological diversity, to our planet - Mother Earth - and to the future of humanity. We are Indigenous because we are conscious of the great responsibility and mission we have to Mother Earth. We are bestowed the responsibility to maintain balance within the natural world. When any part is destroyed, all balance is thrown into chaos. When the last tree and icecap are gone, and the last river has dried up, only then will people realize that we cannot eat gold and silver. To nurture the land is an obligation to our ancestors who have passed this to us, and for future generations." *7

Mr. Tamang also spoke at a panel discussion organized by Yachay Wasi in May 2006 during the Fifth session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The event was entitled "Sacred Sites and the Environment from an Indigenous perspective" and was hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme.

Another speaker at this event was Ina Mc Neil, a Lakota artist, great great granddaughter of Chief Sitting Bull:

This is a quote from her speech:

“ We, as indigenous people, still maintain (these) connections with our sacred sites; with our ancestors, and the Creator.

But even more important than our ancestral connection to sacred sites is indigenous people’s belief that everything in the environment has a spirit, and a divine purpose.

It is this one belief that keeps us as Indigenous people from exploiting anything to the point of extinction or permanent damage.

Not only would we be causing irreparable damage to the environment that surrounds us, upon which we are dependent, but to do so would be to disrespect the Creator.

In my language, we refer to the Creator as “Wakan Tanka”.

The Greatest Spiritual Being.

The word “Tanka” meaning “large” or “great”.

The word “Wakan” meaning “Spiritual” or “Holy”.

Therefore, we believe that sacred sites and the environment are “Wakan”.

- They are sacred
- They are holy
- They are of timeless purity
- “They are Wakan”. *8

In conclusion: Spirituality and respect for the environment are key components expressed in these various quotes. With our world facing many problems today, it is vital for us to listen to the indigenous wisdom in a culture of peace.

References:

*1 - Statement of S-G Kofi Annan at Machu Picchu, Peru, 12 November 2003

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/sqsm9005.doc.htm>

*2 - President Clinton's Executive Order on Indian Sacred Sites

<http://www.ncai.org/ncai/resource/documents/governance/clintonsacredsites.htm>

*3 - UNESCO World Heritage Center - June 2001 - Report on the Proposed World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts (WHIPCOE)

<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/whc-01-205-web3e.pdf>

*4 - Summary Report of UNESCO Winnipeg Workshop , 5-8 November 2001

<http://whc.unesco.org/whipcoe/workshop-report.pdf>

* 5 - Report of World Heritage Committee, Helsinki, Finland, 11-16 December 2001

<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2001/whc-01-conf208-24e.pdf> (see pg 57)

*6 - Akwe: Kon Voluntary guidelines for the conduct of cultural, environmental and social impact assessments regarding developments proposed to take place on, or which are likely to impact on, sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities.

<http://www.biodiv.org/doc/publications/akwe-brochure-en.pdf>

*7 - UNESCO publications 2006: International Symposium, Tokyo, 30 May-2June 2005 Conserving Culture and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Sites and Cultural Landscapes - Pg 24: Address by Parshuram Tamang

*8 - Presentation by Ina Mc Neil, Lakota - Yachay Wasi event - 19 May 2006 - UN Hqrs

<http://www.yachaywasi-ngo.org/InaSpeech.pdf>