

INDIGENOUS SACRED SITES: BIODIVERSITY AND SPIRITUALITY
A Conference organized by Yachay Wasi
Acopia, Province of Acomayo, Dept of Cuzco, Peru, 5 thru 11 April 2009

Background paper by Yachay Wasi

INKA CHALLENGE: From desecration of human remains to sacred sites...

One basis of racism and religious intolerance, propagated by Western scholars, has been to denigrate the pre-Columbian religions as pagan worship of "gods" such as sun god or mountain god in Inka religion. One of its consequences has been the desecration by scientists of Inka burial sites in the Andes and display of Indigenous remains. These ancient religions worshipped the one Creator and revered other entities as "spirits" who are not gods, but emanations from the Creator or symbols of the Creator's spiritual power.

Spirituality, which expresses itself in religion, is at the core of the fabric of human beings. Religions, especially ancient religions, are not evaluated for their true meanings and are denigrated by others who think they know best because of misconceptions carried thru centuries by clergies, universities, press, magazines, television, films etc...This is particularly the case with the religion of the Inkas.

As outlined in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2007, Indigenous peoples want their religions to be recognized as for instance Native American religions were recognized in 1978 and protected by law in the USA since 1990 or the Maya religion which was recognized in the peace process in Guatemala.

The INKA CHALLENGE when started in **1996** by Yachay Wasi was: **"Will American scientists and their American non-profit sponsors respect Indigenous Peoples' spiritual heritage in foreign countries?"**

Prompted by NY Times article May 8, 1996 "Archeologists in Peru oppose loan of Inca Mummy to US" announcing the May 21- June 19, 1996 exhibit of a 500 years old Inca young girl's remains at Washington DC headquarters of National Geographic Society, Yachay Wasi started its Inka Challenge Campaign with a petition against the exhibit.

Between 25 May and 5 July 1996, besides numerous press releases and letters to magazines and newspapers, letters were sent to President Clinton, Reg Murphy, then President of National Geographic Society, archeologist José Antonio Chavez, Peru, Dr. Konrad Spindler, Austria, Dr. Sonia Guillén, Peru and several letters to archeologist Johan Reinhard who was very insulting on the phone and threatened law suits until he made an unexpected visit to the home of Yachay Wasi President Luis Delgado Hurtado in Cuzco, Peru in July 1996.

Yachay Wasi Inka Challenge resulted in a paragraph on page 3 of the UN brochure published in February 1998 as part of the UN Press Kit for the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Title: "Indigenous People: Challenges facing the international community".

1998: INKA CHALLENGE phase 2: Campaign against Florida International Museum Exhibit "Empires of Mystery: The Incas, the Andes and Lost Civilizations" opening on October 23, 1998 "in time for Halloween" thru April 25, 1999 in St Petersburg, Florida. This campaign was done in cooperation with Sheridan Murphy, American Indian Movement of Florida, referred to Yachay Wasi by the International Indian Treaty Council. A statement was sent to the 4th World Archeological Congress taking place in January 99 in Cape Town, South Africa.

1999: INKA CHALLENGE phase 3: Unearthing of Inka children's remains in the Andes: Johan Reinhard finds and removes 3 Inka children from the Andes. NY TIMES article April 7, 1999

The campaign against the Florida International Museum had a fitting ending in April 1999 when the issue of Desecration of Indigenous Burial Sites and Display of Indigenous Remains was presented by Yachay Wasi to the Human Rights NGO Caucus of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development 7th Session. One of the issues that year was Sustainable Tourism. On the actual date of the exhibit closing, the Human Rights NGO Caucus decided to include the issue in its report to the UN Commission.

Since then, many TV programs National Geographic, Discovery Channel, Nova and these programs websites continue to this day to display remains of Indigenous Peoples.

In 1999, Marie-Danielle Samuel had a meeting with an officer of the NY Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and subsequently met briefly Mr Abdelfattah Amor, then Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance. UN conventions established so far do not refer to desecration of burial sites and display of Indigenous remains.

ILO 169 and the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples do cover this, but are not binding.

Note: A letter to NY Times commenting on the misconception of Inka religion shown in a January 2, 2000 Travel article was printed on January 30, 2000 showing that the press is ready to revise old concepts.

TO SACRED SITES...

In June 2001, Yachay Wasi, which had just been granted consultative status with ECOSOC, organized its first **Encounter of Indigenous Communities in the High Andes** in the village of Acopia, Dept of Cuzco, Peru. This event was prepared in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights which sent a representative. At the end of the 5-days meeting, a statement was faxed to UNESCO World Heritage Centre asking that Machu Picchu be recognized and respected as a Sacred Site and that Indigenous Peoples have a say in its protection so that incidents such as the chipping of the ancestral stone of Inti Watana by a beer commercial crane in September 2000 could be prevented in the future.

A direct result was the funded invitation by UNESCO World Heritage Centre for Luis Delgado Hurtado, President of Yachay Wasi, to travel from Cuzco, Peru to attend the Proposed World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts (WHIPCOE) Winnipeg Workshop in November 2001.

This event prompted Marie-Danielle Samuel, Main Representative to the UN for Yachay Wasi, to originate in November 2001 the concept of a Panel Discussion during the historic First Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 13-24 May 2002 at UN Hqrs in NYC.

What was meant to share the good news of WHIPCOE became a quest to keep it alive after the World Heritage Committee turned down its implementation in December 2001 during its meeting in Helsinki, Finland.

To widen the scope of interest, she suggested the involvement of Indigenous communities around the world by sending a Call for Submissions on Sacred sites issues.

A report of this New York University 15 May 2002 Panel Discussion **"During the International Year of Cultural Heritage - Cultural Heritage and Sacred Sites: World Heritage from an Indigenous perspective"**, which included speakers from UNESCO, CBD, OHCHR, NYU and Indigenous representatives, was mailed to the 16 members of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, to UN agencies and to all participants.

In 2006, as Yachay Wasi is organizing its event "Sacred sites and the Environment from an Indigenous perspective" which was hosted by UNEP at UN Hqrs in NYC, curators of a controversial Yale exhibit still claim that Machu Picchu was only a retreat for the ruling class similar to Camp David in USA.

Positively, this traveling exhibit brought the attention of the Peru government which, as far back as 2003, has asked Yale University to return all artifacts related to Machu Picchu to the Land of the Inkas.

The wishes and opinions of the descendants of the Inkas must be heeded. Machu Picchu must be respected as a Sacred site and protected by UNESCO World Heritage Committee, which also should allow the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues to oversee the protection and care of World Heritage Sites having been recognized as Sacred by respective Indigenous communities.

The display, for whatever reasons, of Indigenous remains must stop.

In the words of the 1998 Press Release from the American Indian Movement of Florida: *"Would the Florida International Museum dig up the honorable John F. Kennedy and place his remains on display as a tourist attraction?"*

In 2009, the Inka Challenge still remains: "Will world governments, scientists, non-profit sponsors and tourists respect Indigenous Peoples' spiritual heritage: religion, burial sites and human remains and will the International community respect and allow them to protect their sacred sites?"