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Preserving Sacred Sites in the Arctic

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Published in:

Nordicum - Mediterraneum : Icelandic E-Journal of Nordic and Mediterranean Studies

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.33112/nm.17.3.3>

Published: 27.04.2022

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):

Ayonghe, A. (2022). Preserving Sacred Sites in the Arctic: Lessons from elsewhere? . *Nordicum - Mediterraneum : Icelandic E-Journal of Nordic and Mediterranean Studies*, 17(3), 1-3.
<https://doi.org/10.33112/nm.17.3.3>

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Greetings! First of all, thank you for reaching out with regard to the question of how sacred sites can best be dealt with here in the Arctic. The answers surely depend on how best the local and indigenous residents see the matter. But, I believe, there are also examples that we can tap into from elsewhere to better address this research problem. During my six years of doctoral research among the Bakweri indigenous group of the Mount Cameroon National Park in sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, I got to gather new insights as to how the people of Mount Cameroon go about preserving their sacred sites amid an adverse system of collaborative management (co-management) that rarely follows principles of equal power-sharing.

The Arctic is not that much different. Here, we find several actors, from mining, tourism, transport, timber extraction, to name a few; all playing a part on the land, simultaneously with the local and indigenous land users, who keep reindeer and cattle, practice fishing, hunting, and other activities. Through my doctoral study, I got to understand how modern forms of land use such as tourism and extractive industries co-exist with customary practices. I think there are some ideas, which I could relate to from my own study, that have relevance to the Arctic. I suggest a fresh start with some of the analytic thoughts that developed from my previous study among the Bakweri. Namely, suitable methods, and theoretical underpinnings, that allow for flexibility and alternatives as to going about sacred sites. In my study, for instance, using ethnography, I was able to reveal the stories or knowledge that indigenous people mask beneath their day-to-day practices of living to continue their spiritual use of the land, its relevance to preserving biodiversity and their culture, which the locals tend to achieve through acts of cultural resilience I find as being rooted in their spiritual relations with the surrounding nature.

Using empirical data from my doctoral research, I raise questions and reflect on: whether similar approaches can be applied to understanding sacred sites in the Arctic; possible ways of reviving or preserving them; and whether there are any potentials for sacred sites to co-exist with other valuable forms of land use in the Arctic without jeopardizing their cultural importance.

The doctoral study I did is entitled “Knowledge Integration in Co-management: A Study on the People of the Mount Cameroon National Park” (MCNP), and it had three research questions:

- a) What is the nature of power relations between park authorities and local communities involved in the co-management of the MCNP?
- b) What agency do people display to boost their resilience?

c) What is the relation between local knowledge and biodiversity?

In terms of theory, the study looked into the interplay between power, hierarchy and egalitarianism as its overarching theoretical framework. Furthermore, it used the linkages between the concepts of traditional knowledge, agency and cultural resilience that are embedded in this framework. In an empirical sense, and for better analysis of the power relations, the study also used sub-concepts directly related to the framework, examples being institutional bricolage, convivial conservation and community resilience.

A twofold set of practices allowing cultural continuity, for instance, where people can preserve their culture and livelihoods through acts of cultural resilience, agency and traditional knowledge. Meaning, as agents, people can concurrently follow and circumvent the co-management system to cope with changes in the local environment.

Agency is one's capacity to bring about change and, for example, can be active or passive, involving experiences of co-opting modern forms of conservation in ways that are meaningful to a people, usually towards the people's own benefit, bringing about cultural resilience. The potential of traditional knowledge in biodiversity conservation is easily exemplified: adopting good practices from the people's spiritual connection to giant tree species and populations of the African forest elephants native to Sub-Sahara.

Three key suggestions as to how the Cameroon study might benefit and support local people in the Arctic are:

a) Developing an understanding of spirituality, differentiating between the park managers' perceptions and the local people's meanings of spirituality. This gives us a prelude to how spiritual sites are categorized, used, and better managed. My study suggests that it is possible to have some sites with multifaceted use, while others do not allow for it, depending on what kind of norms, values and taboos are linked to them.

b) Adopting suitable methods and theories that enable researchers to explore the context of sacred sites in situations of a co-management system. A focus here can be on stories and experiences of how local people navigate the precarious and adverse situations of co-management systems.

c) Also, a focus on scenarios that appeal to the agency of an individual or group, especially where resource governance systems display with threats to the local culture could provide interesting clues about managing sacred sites. For example, how people react, the aspirations they share, and the decisions they make in response to policy agreements.

I will expand more on these issues during the conference. Meanwhile, I hope this abstract gives some preliminary thoughts as to my contribution to the project.

For more information on my doctoral thesis publication, see:

<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-337-307-5>

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