

# Sacred Land Film Project

P.O. Box C-151, La Honda, CA 94020 \ Tel 650-747-0685 \ Fax 650-747-0750 \ slfp@sacredland.org \ www.sacredland.org

## Spirit Wars

by Christopher McLeod

**H**IGH in the Andes, beneath the sacred mountain called Ausangate, glaciers once stretched far down into a revered valley. At the lower edge of the rivers of ice, water has dripped for thousands of years to form the headwaters of streams that sustain Q'eros villages and potato fields below. An ancient pilgrimage to these remote glaciers drew the attention of Spanish priests three centuries ago and a cathedral was built over a large boulder that was the focal point of pilgrims' prayers and offerings. In recent years, the glaciers have been in retreat, pulling back from heated rhetoric and polluted air below. Pilgrims still come to sing, dance and pray, but the mountains are giving less and less water.

With fireworks exploding all night long, it was tough for our film crew to get any sleep. Tens of thousands of pilgrims walk to this sacred valley in May each year for Q'olloy Riti (Star of the Snow) ceremonies. The mountains echo with music and celebration day and night. We had hiked into the 15,000-foot high valley with Q'eros elders to record their early morning ritual of gratitude to the mountains and waters.

At 3AM we gathered outside our tents in frigid thin air under a full moon and began our slow hike up to the glacier. It was a long walk. Peru's glaciers have lost 25% of their mass since 1970. As the



IN THE ANDES OF PERU, Q'EROS PILGRIMS JOURNEY BELOW MT. AUSANGATE ON THEIR WAY TO THE Q'OLLOY RITI CEREMONY.

sky brightened the Q'eros elders decided to perform their ritual in the rocks and snow beneath the glacier's receding toe, because other celebrants were crowding onto the ice. The Q'eros prefer privacy for their rituals because unlike most Andean communities they have firmly resisted Catholicism.

Four men began the ritual, assisted by a teenage boy who was present because he had recently been hit by lightning — nature's way of recognizing and giving power to a future leader. Each man reached into a colorful woven bag and pulled out three coca leaves. They arranged the green leaves carefully between their fingers, held them up to their mouths and blew breath and prayer toward Ausangate, the powerful Apu spirit that controls the local weather and gives water and life to the people below.

As the sun rose and lit the craggy mountaintops, we heard yelling and loud

whistles. The *poblitos*, or police of the valley, descended upon us from both sides. In raucous tones they informed the Q'eros they could not perform their ritual here and we could not film. The ceremony stopped and negotiations resulted in the Q'eros moving a quarter mile away to continue the ceremony. Sheltered by a large boulder, we set up our camera and resumed filming as the Q'eros lit a fire and prepared an elaborate offering to Ausangate.

After the ritual the Q'eros gazed with concern at the shrinking glacier, which they know is caused by consumers and industries in far-away lands. Traditionally, these pilgrims carve out a block of ice and carry the holy water down to their people below as a blessing. This year, for the first time, that practice was forbidden due to concern about the glaciers — they may be gone in ten years. Mariano Carmen Machacca, the Q'eros leader, said, "What will the weather be like? Where will our water come from? If there are no snows, how will the alpaca and potatoes survive? That will be a time of great concern."

≈ ≈ ≈ ≈

A series of month-long filming trips away from my wife Jessica and our two children was hard on our family, so it was a joy to have them with me on my first visit to the Hawaiian island of Kaho'olawe in July. It's a rigorous trip,



AT THE HIGHEST POINT ON THE HAWAIIAN ISLAND OF KAHŌ'OLAWĒ, A ROCK SHRINE DEMONSTRATES THE REBIRTH OF TRADITIONAL HAWAIIAN CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY, DESPITE THOUSANDS OF UNEXPLODED BOMBS LEFT BY THE U.S. NAVY.



Photos by Christopher McLeod

starting on a Maui beach with a long swim to a boat to which a floating line of people pass everything from water jugs, food coolers, garbage bags full of clothing, and even an 11-month-old baby. After a 7-mile crossing we jumped into the surf a hundred yards off Kaho'olawe for the final swim to the beach.

Deeply scarred by 50 years of U.S. Navy bombardment, Kaho'olawe sparked the Hawaiian land rights movement by drawing young activists to its defense in the 1970s. After a long battle the bombing was stopped and the Navy agreed to clean up the island and return it to Hawaiian sovereign control. The clean-up was essentially a failure as \$400 million could only pay for the removal of about 30% of the unexploded (and toxic) ordnance. However, important parts of the island were cleared, and ecological and spiritual restoration is now taking root under the able leadership of a committed band of activists.

On our last day on the island, 40 adults and 20 children hiked up over eroding hills, ever vigilant for ordnance that frequently pushes up through the red dirt after heavy rains. We reached the high point of the island as a woman quietly poured water on the four corners of a beautiful rock shrine. Walking back down toward our camp on the coast, we

watched a dark rain cloud shower the parched slopes.



For the last three years, with my colleague Rob Wild, I edited and wrote guidelines for the management of sacred natural sites in protected areas around the world. UNESCO and IUCN published the book this year, and as a result sacred site management is now an official category of conservation practice with internationally recognized guidelines, principles and policies, all supported by more than a dozen case studies. The book is a milestone achievement that affirms that sacred places are the oldest protected areas on the planet.

At the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, sponsored by IUCN (the World Conservation Union), sacred site guardians from dozens of countries gathered in October. The movement to protect species and ecosystems has expanded to include indigenous communities and has recognized traditional knowledge as a critically important form of conservation, which often centers on sacred places where the values of responsibility, reciprocity and reverence run strong and deep.

During the Congress, we held a press conference, launched the guidelines and filmed eight hours of discussions between guardians, policy makers and conservationists. We also made seven different film presentations, for even as we shoot and edit the *Losing Sacred Ground* series we are producing web clips, community videos and 15-minute films to help in local struggles.



In the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia, seven elders sit on the green grass of Dorbo meadow, discussing communal grazing lands, family conflicts, and the upcoming Mascal ceremony that will start the following day. They explain the fire ritual they will conduct in a grove of trees at the edge of the meadow in a couple of days and give blessings to my request to film them.

Sacred sites and surrounding ecosystems in Ethiopia have been cared for through a complex land management regime for generations. Local ecologists Professor Zerihun Woldu and graduate student Desalegn Desissa spent a year documenting how biodiversity is greater in sacred forests than in other areas.

Professor Woldu says, "The important point is that sacred groves are where the



AT THE LAUNCH of the Sacred Site Guidelines in Barcelona, IUCN Director General Julia Marton-Lefèvre said, "What

really moved me about this project is that we dared to address issues such as religion, culture, spirituality – and we addressed those issues very wisely. It shows a tremendous amount of respect for other cultures and the spirituality of people who we perhaps didn't know enough about before. Let's now make sure that these sacred sites are actually respected and protected so that my great-great-grandchildren can also appreciate them."

most important biodiversity is preserved. They provide seeds to restore depleted areas elsewhere. It's not only sacred groves, but isolated trees, small springs, a rock, even a village lane can be considered sacred for as long as the life cycle of an important species provides seeds, say for a medicine. That's how biodiversity is maintained and managed in a living cultural landscape mosaic. It is not a landscape absent of people, it is conservation in action."

This system is now under attack by fundamentalist Protestants, and centuries of tolerance by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is crumbling as the competing Christian sects vie to hold on to or win new converts. Traditional elders are terribly concerned.

I had thought missionary attacks on people in Africa were limited to stories from the 19th century. A respected elder, Makko Dogisso, showed me the site of the Muta Mountain shrine he was tending three years ago when he was beaten and chased away by Orthodox believers. His shrine was torn down and a church and cemetery constructed on the site.

Kapo Kansa Gano directs the Society for the Practice and Maintenance of Indigenous Cultural Environmental and Spiritual Knowledge. Standing by another new church and a cleared forest he said, "The Protestants want to destroy the artifacts on the ground, and they tell people, 'Don't acknowledge sacred places, mountains, rivers, a tree in the forest. All you need is the gospel. All you need is Jesus.' They cleared this forest for a church. It was an important meeting place where everything was discussed. They call the traditional practices 'satanic' — and say 'this is not important for the world.' Meanwhile, our government is ignorant. We go to meetings and speak of special places and they say 'you are lying' — so we need recordings, we need to show this to them."

In October, six brides-to-be paraded through a green meadow, the tops of their heads covered with a yellow head-dress made of butter. A throng of women beat drums, sang and danced. The four-day Mascal ceremony was drawing to a close as the rainy season gave way to planting, harvesting and prayers for fertility and happiness.

On the hillside above, young men called *callonitis* (cowboys) prepared to descend, an initiation ritual for 12-year-

old boys, who were surrounded by a group of young men chanting encouragement. Suddenly, in the middle of the meadow beneath the *callonitis*, a large crowd gathered and began erecting a circle of poles in the center of the meadow. People began pointing and yelling. A delegation of elders gathered and climbed up the hill. Tense negotiations followed and we learned that fundamentalist Protestants were constructing what they described as "a building for a conference" directly in the path of the young boys' final ritual procession. The crowd around the Protestants grew into the hundreds.

Police arrived and raised their rifles. My Ethiopian friends would not allow me to go up on the hill to film the confrontation.

"That building is meant to be a church," one said. "This is dangerous."

With a surge, the two big crowds began to move toward each other and gunshots boomed as the police tried to keep the traditional group from advancing on the Protestants. People screamed, cried and ran as gunshots continued. The police were firing into the air.

"It's a provocation," said Nathaniel Wolde, our young production assistant, angered that the final ritual was being disrupted and communal land taken by zealots before our eyes.

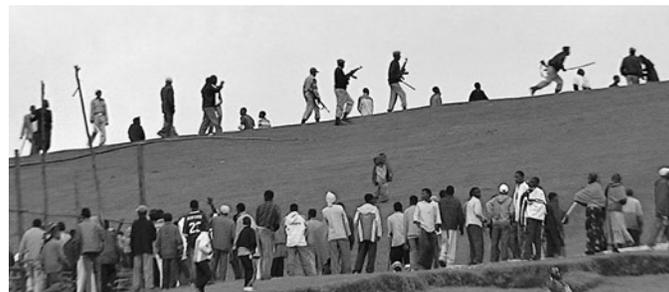
"It is illegal," answered Metasebia Bekele, the Ethiopian anthropologist who was traveling with us, as we watched the melee unfold on the hillside above us.

A few final gunshots rang out as the crowds swirled and ran from the police. Rocks flew through the air. Through the viewfinder in the camera I could see three policemen with Kalashnikovs chasing people, and others with big sticks raised as they ran. More stones rained down. Later, as darkness set in and the stand-off continued, we drove away, and a rock smashed the windshield of our car.



Photo by Corwin Fergus

IN ETHIOPIA'S GAMO HIGHLANDS, ELDERS MEET AT SACRED DORBO MEADOW, WHERE ON THE FOLLOWING DAY POLICE PROTECT PROTESTANTS ERECTING A CHURCH AND DISRUPTING THE TRADITIONAL MASCAL CEREMONY.



Video by Christopher McLeod

While mining, dams, global warming and tourism continue to threaten indigenous lands and sacred places — and remain the main focus of our *Losing Sacred Ground* film series — aggressive, competing religions emerged this year as an important theme from Australia to Peru and from Ethiopia to Hawaii.

As destructive as the U.S. Navy was on Kaho'olawe, the missionaries' impact on traditional Hawaiian culture was equally devastating. Protect Kaho'olawe Ohana member Davianna Pomaika'i McGregor believes that "the sacred bond between land and people was broken for so many people and that relationship was suspended for generations. The idea of original sin and salvation led to human superiority over nature, secularization of land, private property, breaking the bond of human to land."

McGregor says Native Hawaiians are "calling back our gods of nature, rededicating sites, reviving cultural and spiritual practices, and bringing land and people back into proper relationship. We are planning the future of Kaho'olawe as a sacred place, where people are immersed in the elements and honor land as sacred."

To Kaho'olawe, the exiles have returned. The island and the people are renewing one another.