

Sacred Land Film Project

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If We Don't Laugh, We'll Cry

by Christopher McLeod

FROM ALL OVER central Asia, 25 indigenous guardians of sacred sites were en route to the magnificent Karakol Valley in Russia's Altai Mountains. Healers from Kyrgyzstan, activists from Lake Baikal and spiritual leaders from Mongolia all gathered in the land where the word *shaman* originated, and where throat singers still honor the earth with otherworldly intonations over a crackling fire. For two days in July, these caretakers strategized on how to save their ancient landscapes from modern threats.

They shared traditional rituals and contemporary networking — in disparate languages, but with common values based on the cultural, spiritual and ecological necessity of respect for the sacred in nature.

The Sacred Land Film Project crew was privileged to record this historic meeting, and accompany the participants on a pilgrimage. Along the way they delved into how they care for land, the nature of their blessings, the conflicts they face and the strategies that have worked.

We enjoy the odd challenges of international travel and film production. Soundman Dave Wendlinger listened for hours as he set audio levels on dialogue in languages he couldn't



AT A SACRED SPRING BELOW THE PASS TO THE UKOK PLATEAU, ALTAIAN ACTIVIST MAYA ERLNBAEVA OFFERS MILK AT A SUNRISE CEREMONY BEFORE HEADING OVER THE MOUNTAINS. MARIA AMANCHINA, WITH PIPE, PRESIDES.

Photo by Christopher McLeod

to prevent Russia's natural gas company, Gazprom, from building a natural gas pipeline across the Altai to China. But it's politics with a heart. "In our prayers and songs there is no request at all. We simply give thanks, knowing that the more blessings we give, the more we will receive."

Danil describes Uch Enmek as an umbilical cord, a place of nourishment, receptivity and information. "A shaman comes to these places as a pilgrim and receives certain information. The shaman then distributes this information at a

human level in human language. This land is important for that reason." As Danil spoke, I recalled Native American scholar Vine Deloria explaining the revelations that comes from a sacred place: "What the revelation is telling you is how you and your community at this time in life can adjust to the rest of the world." Do we know how to listen?

The following morning, 14 of the participants began a long journey to the Ukok Plateau, a World Heritage Site known to the ancient Greeks as a hallowed burial ground — "the pastures of heaven." Before attempting to go over the high pass to the plateau (where a sudden blizzard turned us back in June 2007), Altaian shaman Maria Amanchina led a sunrise ceremony

understand. Cameraman Andy Black hustled ahead with heavy gear trying to get in front of a group of shamans who don't take direction easily, especially when they can't understand the director. After two days indoors we headed out into the exhilarating air of the wildflower-carpeted Karakol Valley. Standing beneath the sacred Uch Enmek Mountain, next to a 12-foot-high standing stone that marks an ancient burial, Danil Mamyev, founder of Uch Enmek Nature Park, thanked his visiting colleagues: "By networking sacred site guardians we also connect the places, and the guardians and the sacred places are all strengthened." Danil is racing the clock to survey and map the park to head off privatization of land. He is also active in the fight

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Photo by Christopher McLeod

DANIL MAMYEV ON THE UKOK PLATEAU.

with Danil and Maya Erlenbaeva offering milk to the four directions. After the ritual, the group made a circuit of 13 holy springs before heading off toward Russia's edge-of-the-world border with Mongolia and China, where they hoped to find the burial site of the renowned Ukok Princess, a 2,500-year-old mummy unearthed in 1993 by Russian archaeologists who were working without a permit.

For six hours we jolted along a rough track in indestructible Russian-built vehicles known as *Uazis*. We stopped along Gazprom's proposed pipeline route to visit ancient megaliths and to watch pairs of cranes soar above sparkling wetlands. Finally, the pilgrims made it to a disturbed rock pile that now marks an empty burial. The young warrior woman whose peace was interrupted had been buried in permafrost, so her intricately tattooed skin was well preserved. Her clothing was nearly in perfect shape. Altaians immediately protested the removal of their ancestor and demanded her return from a refrigerated glass case in a museum. A major earthquake rocked the region in 2003, and the locals attributed the earth tremor to the disturbance of the dead.

The visiting guardians dropped to their knees at the gravesite. A steady wind began to blow. Beneath a pure blue sky, the pilgrims wept. Maria and Danil conducted a solemn ritual, calling out to the spirit of the Ukok Princess and praying for her return and reburial. Afterward, Danil said, "The wind has been speaking to us, it's a good sign."

After finishing the ritual, we drove for an hour and stopped on a high promon-

tory encircled by a ring of snowcapped mountains for a late lunch. Maria presented gifts to our film crew. She tied a red sash around each of our waists. I went last, and as she began to pass the sash around me she laughed. I wondered if my zipper was down, but was afraid to look. Later, she explained: "When I began to tie the red scarf around your waist the wind blew and the scarf wrapped itself around you, and all I had to do was finish tying it in back. That was a really good sign. All roads will be open to you."

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WE SAID GOODBYE to our new friends and traveled a long road to the Altai's most prominent sacred mountain, Mt. Belukha. While planning our film trip I found a tour for spiritual pilgrims advertised on the Internet and a Russian-born shaman named Ahamkara willing to let us film his group. I knew from the start that native Altaian shamans like Maria consider generic rituals and shamans-for-hire to be a dangerous form of "spiritual pollution." I wanted to see for myself.

In a birch forest lit by campfire, we met a European group comprised of sincere, well-intentioned seekers. The drumming and chanting seemed harmless enough. We agreed to meet the following evening at sunset to film a healing ritual. After days of intermittent rain, we were excited upon our return to find the group bathed in magic golden light. As

Ahamkara drummed over the bodies of his group lying in a bed of flowers, he told them he was invoking the Altaian wolf spirit. Two of the men in the group began moaning and growling and rolling around on the ground in convulsions. They later told us that they had become wolves. It was an intimate and revealing moment.

Once again we filmed a scene that raises the perennial question: how do we from fractured cultures rediscover appropriate ways to spiritually connect with the earth? From Macchu Pichu in Peru to Uluru in Australia, I have seen tourists from the developed world cause offense to native people by disrespecting the traditions of the place — nearly always unintentionally, and often by imitating the rituals of the local community. The scene of young Americans at the spring on Mt. Shasta from *In the Light of Reverence* is one of the most talked-about scenes in any of my films. It makes us uncomfortable because we ask ourselves: am I like that?

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BACK IN northern California, soft October light shimmered on the McCloud River as Winnemem Wintu leaders Mark and Caleen Sisk-Franco showed us signs of ancestral villages. The grinding rocks, home sites and burials will be submerged if Shasta Lake, the enormous reservoir held back by Shasta



Photo by Christopher McLeod

Dam, is enlarged by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and backs further up into this wild stretch of the McCloud River.

Upstream from the houseboats, marinas and weekend fishermen, a tall boulder balances over a deep, shadowy pool named for the sucker fish spirit that inhabits it. If the dam is raised, the Winnemem will never see the Sucker Pool again. For generations, young warriors and leaders have swum across the pool as part of their initiation rites.

Mark and Caleen knelt on the shore, lit a pipe, put hands in the water and prayed for the sacred site as Will Parrinello filmed this quiet healing and blessing ceremony. "This is not a recreation area to us, it is a life way," Caleen said later. "I had to swim across this pool, years ago. To think we might lose it breaks my heart."

For the Winnemem, it was a bitter-sweet year. After strong local resistance, Nestlé dropped plans to bottle millions of gallons of pure water from within Mt. Shasta that would have threatened the mountain's artesian springs. But high on Shasta's slopes visitors continue to dump human cremation ashes in the Winnemem's sacred spring, causing ecological harm to a pristine meadow and water source, and wreaking spiritual havoc by defiling the tribe's origin place.

Facing daunting odds the Winnemem fight on, like indigenous communities all around the world. Their tenacity and sense of humor give me hope. "We will endure no matter what," says Caleen, "and if we don't laugh, we'll cry."

Back on the river, camera rolling, Mark points out subtle depressions where round bark houses once stood. Caleen slyly indicates an old house site and proclaims, "That one is square. *Pihotlelnas* must have lived there!" and riotous laughter follows. *Pihotlelnas* is the name Caleen gave me a few years ago so if a spirit asks Caleen who we are when we film ceremonies, she can give my name in a language the spirits understand — *Pihotlelnas*, the one who always wants to be first.



◀ CALEEN SISK-FRANCO BLESSES THE SUCKER POOL ON THE McCLOUD RIVER.

▶ REFINERIES IN CANADA USE THREE BARRELS OF WATER TO PRODUCE ONE BARREL OF OIL FROM TAR SANDS AND GENERATE MOUNTAINS OF TOXIC WASTE.

Our 8th and Final Story: Alberta Tar Sands

Flying over Canada's expansive boreal forest, with poplars ablaze in fall colors, I was struck by water's meandering path across the landscape. Snakelike rivers and shining pools gathered and flowed through the trees, enjoying a few last days of freedom before the big freeze-up. Suddenly, our plane crossed the Athabasca River and an industrial landscape of smokestacks, methane flare towers and tailings ponds defied the chill of autumn. With all the hip talk about creating a green economy and controlling global carbon emissions, the reality of Alberta's tar sands oil boom is propelling us in precisely the opposite direction. With 1.8 million barrels of oil per day flowing south to the United States from Alberta's refineries, Canada's infrastructure is now a sensitive source of national security. No wonder it remains an untold story.

Unlike the Altai people of Central Asia, who are fighting to protect a relatively pristine environment, the Cree, Dene and Métis people of Alberta are on the front lines of an oil rush that is visibly destroying their water and air — and hence their health. Numerous cancer deaths are causing grief and concern throughout the area though government and industry assure the public that environmental regulations are being followed and the release of toxic chemicals is under control. Meanwhile, massive draglines gouge out huge buckets full of oily sand and mammoth 30-foot-tall trucks haul the black earth away for grinding, steaming and piping — oil into one pipeline, tailings into another. The scale of the operation is staggering.

On a frigid clear day, cameraman Andy Black and I traveled across Lake Athabasca with 72-year-old Raymond Ladouceur in a fishing boat he has used for years. Ray took us to a house he built in the bush, fed us moose steaks he'd hunted the previous day and set a trapline for beaver as we filmed. Ray has witnessed a plague of deformed fish and a huge reduction in animal populations. In an interview, the Métis elder said: "I understand the need to make a living. People have to work. What concerns me is the pollution of air and water. The frogs used to sound so good. Now it's silent. They're telling us something — they have been telling us for a long time. If we can put a man on the moon we can figure out a way to discharge clean water. The elders used to tell me everything has life on this earth. Water has a spirit. Once we pollute that water so much we're going to kill that spirit, and there'll be no life and spirit, that water will be totally poisoned. So while it's alive, save it."

Our managing producer Jennifer Huang and I left Alberta feeling energized by yet another challenge — a huge story that falls into place to take the eighth and final slot in *Losing Sacred Ground*. Jennifer flew off to Edmonton in an effort to secure an interview with Suncor, the oil sands company. I flew back to Berkeley yet again humbled to be meeting native people who hold their whole watershed to be sacred and to be collaborating with Fort Chipewyan's indigenous community to tell the story of their struggle to preserve and renew cultural traditions in the face of rapid change.



Photo by Christopher McLeod