

# Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world,  
indigenous people stand up  
for their traditional sacred lands  
in defense of cultural survival,  
human rights and the environment.

## Remembering the Elders

BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

ON THE DAY Hopi elder Thomas Banyacya died in 1999, I was in a raging blizzard on a mountaintop in California's Sierra Nevada, and I felt his spirit in the howling wind. It felt clear to me that he did not want to go—and the Earth for whom he had spoken for half a century did not want him to go either.

With snow swirling, I braced against the gale and recalled the first time I met Thomas in 1978. He had been serving as spokesman for Hopi clan and village leaders for 30 years, working to fulfill a cultural obligation to protect the spiritual center of the continent. After an hour-long interview we stood outside his home on the arid Hopi mesas under a bright blue sky. He said, "I know you want to make a film about the rape of the earth, stripmining, power plants polluting the air, radioactive uranium tailings blowing in the wind, lung cancer, birth defects. Those are material things. But the environmental crisis is a spiritual crisis, and until your people—and until you—learn that, overcome your blindness, and reconnect to the natural world *spiritually*, the environmental crisis will continue. The violence will go on and on. We can stop the stripmining here, but we're facing a much bigger problem."

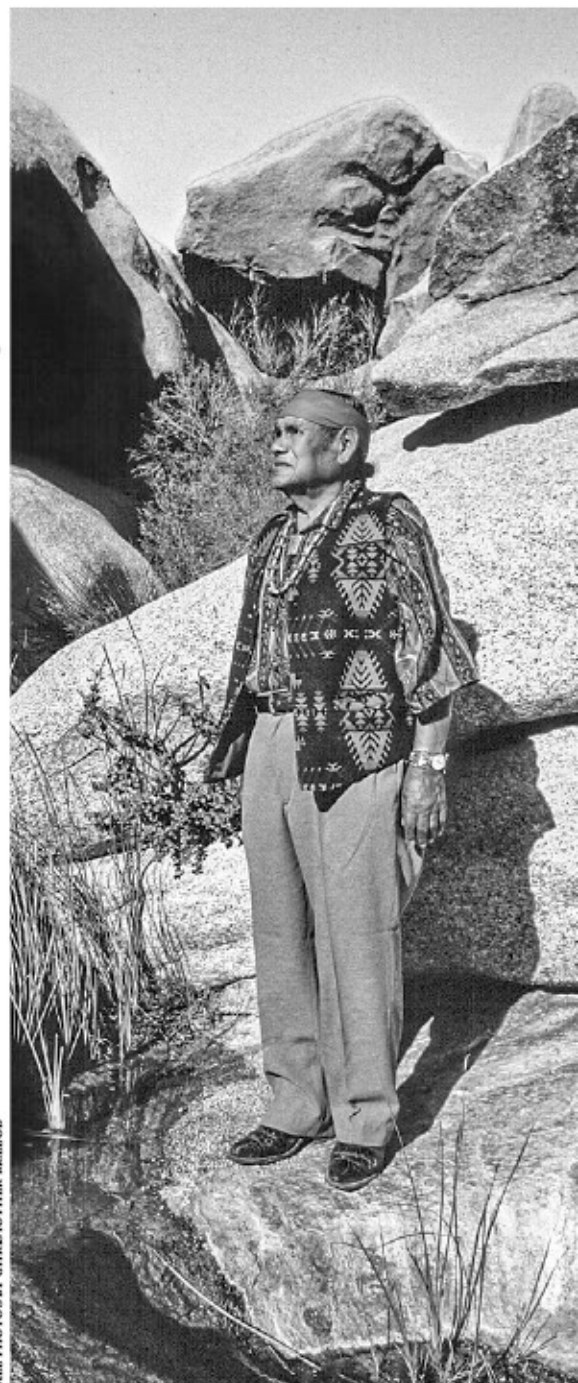
After that life-changing challenge, raindrops fell from the cloudless sky. Thomas said, "This is good." It was the start of an unusual partnership that lasted more than 20 years, as we traveled

to events in Phoenix, San Francisco, Las Vegas, New York and Washington, D.C.

As often as I could arrange it, Thomas spoke at film screenings. I wanted people to hear Hopi warnings of the inevitable consequences of humanity's continuing abuse of Mother Earth. It wasn't prophecy, it was native science evolved through centuries of observation. And as the elders patiently explained to me in the ensuing years, one of the best antidotes to imbalance and chaos is to go to sacred sites—to hear the stories, to practice respect, and to help protect these long-revered places of power.

After two decades of chasing Thomas around with a film camera, I realized that if I could get him far away from the Hopi villages, he felt more free to talk. So in October 1996, we agreed to travel west to a sacred site in Nevada that Thomas wanted to visit. He said it was an important place he'd often heard mentioned in the kiva, Spirit Mountain, a place visited during Hopi ancestral migrations.

Before we hit the road, Thomas took me to see 103-year-old Dan Evehema in Hotevilla village. Along with Dan Kachongva, David Monongye and Thomas, "Little Dan" Evehema was appointed spokesman by Hopi elders in 1948, after the atom bomb fulfilled Hopi prophecy about a perilous "gourd full of ashes" that would prove humans had gone too far with dangerous technology and inventions.



ALL PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

Thomas Banyacya in Grapevine Canyon, part of the new *Avi Kwa Ame* National Monument

Little Dan recounted the history of the area we were going to visit—he called it “the place where the grapevines grow”—and, to my surprise, he presented me with a baby eagle feather to bless our journey.

A few days later, we drove toward Spirit Mountain, known to native people as *Avi Kwa Ame*. Little Dan’s downy eagle feather dangled from the rearview mirror, backlit by the rising sun. From the mouth of Grapevine Canyon, we hiked up a steep, sandy slope on a narrow path bordered by green grapevines. I noticed that Thomas, now 86 years old, was wearing brown leather street shoes. He paused at an auburn cliff face covered with petroglyphs.

Pointing at a figure with a cryptic headdress, he said, “During the migration time, our ancestors went to the four directions. This looks like a symbol of the One Horn Society, a powerful society. One Horn is an admonisher. If you don’t behave, they come and...you’d better behave.”

Clearly feeling the connection to his ancestors, Thomas read timeless messages left on rock—the same messages as today—with warnings about hubris, and the need to conduct the rituals that Hopi clans developed during their migrations.

“They keep this land in balance through prayer and ceremony, so that this world will continue. You can have all the inventions but you cannot stop the rain, or earthquakes, or hurricanes. Inventions of the white man can’t stop it. It has to come from the heart of spiritual people who know what to sing to keep nature in balance.

“It’s amazing to see these grapevines between rocky mesas. I think the ancestors who came through here planted these. Grapevines produce food and help other living things grow. It’s like you pray for a plant and you make other plant life grow too. That spirit comes from your heart. And that’s the way these grapevines are. They are here to help other living things down below grow.”

After a long, slow climb into a high-walled cirque, Thomas began to search around. Our pilgrimage reached its goal when he found a spring with tall reeds growing around a small pool of water. As we filmed, he whispered a prayer in Hopi, offered cornmeal to the clear waters, and

gently laid an eagle feather on the wet sand next to the spring.

“I am here to bring a message from the elders to the spring people and other living things on this earth who are here—plants, birds, animals, spirit people, unseen forces. I’m glad to see this spring is still here, and I hope it will continue to give water to every living thing on this earth. Our way is to offer a prayer to sacred sites like this. I’m glad I made it up here. It was kind of hard to get up, but I made it,” he said with a laugh. I detected a faint, lingering smile of satisfaction.

Thomas would no doubt be pleased to know that 27 years after our visit, an American president heard his prayers and warnings and established a national monument in honor of the native history and sacred nature of Spirit Mountain, *Avi Kwa Ame*.



The theme of remembering the elders intensified this year, after my filmmaking partner Jessica Abbe and I helped the Winnemem Wintu Tribe secure a \$2.3 million grant from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife for salmon restoration in the ice-cold waters of the McCloud River below Mt. Shasta. We knew that a large grant to a small tribe in this new era of recognition for traditional ecological and spiritual knowledge might have negative consequences. Sure enough, the grant has caused some disruption and stress—let’s call it growing pains. Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk is struggling to manage success.

On the first of May, Caleen signed a historic co-management agreement with the state of California and a co-stewardship agreement with the federal government, to bring endangered winter run Chinook salmon back to the wild stretch of the McCloud River above Shasta Dam. I was asked to moderate the signing ceremony. Before it began, Caleen and I stood on the banks of a very full Shasta Reservoir and she teared up imagining Winnemem ancestors from all of the villages along the river who would have come to such an important meeting, traveling on pathways now deep under water. She wondered aloud what her great aunt and mentor Florence Jones—“Grams”—would think as their unrecognized tribe achieved a significant measure of recognition from a government the tribe has been fighting for almost two centuries.

As allies and storytellers, can we help heal this historic trauma and not add to it?

Amidst this turmoil it occurred to me that we should begin tackling our archiving challenge by editing together all of the footage we shot of Florence Jones in the 1990s, which many Winnemem youth have never seen. Florence was a “top doctor,” a renowned medicine woman, born on the river, stolen away to a government boarding school, pressured to convert to Christianity. She refused. It took her 38 years to learn the medicine plants and to establish relationships with all of her spirit helpers. Her leadership enabled the Winnemem to survive a brutal 20th century.



From right, Cathy Marcinkavage, NOAA Fisheries, Chuck Bonham, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk, Big Salmon, moderator Toby (Christopher) McLeod

PHOTO BY JESSICA ABBE



Winnemem dancers celebrate the salmon co-management agreement, May 1, 2023

We have six hours of footage of Florence, and only about ten minutes made it into our finished documentaries. We filmed Grams arguing with a U.S. Forest Service supervisor at a three-hour meeting, admonishing loggers who felled a grove of sacred trees on Cold Springs Mountain, praying at length in the Winnemem language as she blesses and heals her people and their homeland at several sacred sites. All of this footage has lingered on tapes in a cabinet in our editing room, waiting for decades to be seen.

Perhaps we can facilitate healing, harmony and new insights by privately presenting this footage of a traditional elder to her descendants, bringing knowledge, inspiration and restoration of language. Hopefully this can help ground and rebalance the tribe as they struggle with a sprawling “emergency salmon restoration project” and the predictable disruption caused by an enormous infusion of money.

In one of the first scenes we filmed with Florence, she is anguished about how the Forest Service and New Agers have damaged the sacred spring in Panther Meadows on Mt. Shasta—the Winnemem place of origin where a healing ceremony takes place every August. In the footage, Florence is upset and angry. She speaks intensely for 17 minutes. “I’m disgusted, and so is my spring,” she mourns. “I need this place to heal my

people.” We only used nine seconds of what she said in *In the Light of Reverence*. At one point, after praying to her sacred mountain and receiving an answer from the spirit world, she challenges the tribe, looking straight into the camera, “Do you want the mountain to blow up? I can pull that string the Creator gave me to end the world.” We did not use any of this material in the film. I was ambivalent about how audiences would react. Now it seems historically significant and important for all of the Winnemem to see. (See sidebar for transcript.)

The way Grams talks, how she prays, her sense of humor, her use of a language now rarely spoken—I am sure Winnemem youth and elders will see things I do not. This situation has made me aware of the responsibility we now have to archive 40 years of sensitive footage, and to do so in a way that protects our subjects, shares content we do not understand, and honors all that we have been privileged to record.



As we continue to film Ohlone resistance at the West Berkeley Shellmound, the owner of the 2.2 acres put the property up for sale this year, but failed to attract any buyers as interest rates and labor costs rose alongside growing

Ohlone leader Corrina Gould at the West Berkeley Shellmound

citizen opposition to housing construction on the site. This ancient village and burial site was occupied for 5,700 years, and for the last seven years Lisjan Ohlone leader Corrina Gould has led a lively sacred site protection movement while raising significant funding to protect her ancestors and what’s left of the massive shellmound they built. Settlers leveled the shellmound to fertilize farms and pave muddy streets, but much remains underground.

At a recent street painting event at the site, I mentioned my struggles with the Winnemem, the increasingly stressful role I was feeling as both outsider and ally. Corrina thought for a moment and said, “A good ally continues to show up even when you feel like you aren’t getting anywhere. Remember relationships. You are a part of the prayer.”

Gazing at the chain-link fence and “No Trespassing” signs that surround her ancestral site, I asked Corrina, “If the Ohlone win the land back, what would be the message of the seven-year struggle?”

“Things can change in this world,” she replied. “It is trust that makes things right. Partnering has made this dream a reality. Thousands of people—allies, funders, and native people—the West Berkeley Shellmound brings people together. Before, resources were unavailable to help native people protect sacred sites. Now we see what happens when resources are made available.





Powerful prayers have been laid down at the West Berkeley Shellmound by people from all over the world. That has changed the energy of the place and helped make this happen.”

The lessons of the West Berkeley Shellmound struggle are profound, and we look forward to weaving them into a powerful film when the Ohlone win the land back, which they very well might, and soon. Working in community to make change, challenging hierarchy and inequity, using art and journalism to document the dismantling of white supremacy—this work nurtures a revolution of thought. As native people fight to return land to indigenous stewardship, they challenge the capitalist notion of private property. Decolonizing land relations is heart work. It has the power to transform the violence inherent in human ownership of land.

Locally, we are watching a sacred site bring people together to reimagine land ownership, restore indigenous stewardship, as together we ask, “What is the right use of this land?”



This past April, one of my mentors, Jerry Mander, passed away at the age of 86. Jerry hired me to organize a conference in 1980 on “Technology: Over the Invisible Line?” where I met Onondaga faithkeeper Oren Lyons, writer Barry Lopez, and others who remained friends for life. The author of *In the Absence of the Sacred* and several other books, Jerry taught me about creative, disruptive storytelling—journalism as activism. I remember showing a rough cut of *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?* to advisors David Brower and Ben Bagdikian at Friends of the Earth. Jerry passed by the open door as the film played, stopped, backed up, came in and watched the entire film. His comments made it a better film, and he was an invaluable advisor on both *In the Light of Reverence* and *Standing on Sacred Ground*.

Jerry’s wife Koohan Paik wrote some compelling reflections after he died: “Communion and fellowship are what will get us through, no matter what the bastards do. Solidarity, as it were. After all, what is solidarity, if not fellowship

made political? Perhaps the arc of the moral universe bends not toward justice, but toward solidarity. If we can bear these injustices together, we can work together to seek justice...The true value, it turned out, was in the solidarity built



by doing the early work, especially in the face of insurmountable odds. Whether we win or lose, our stories become part of us, connect us to our forebears, and also to each other. They are our foundation, and in a certain sense, this is the ultimate lesson of activism. Our shared humanity. The stories of those who have spoken truth to power throughout history are lodestones that give direction to the justice-minded who follow.”



Another dear elder passed away this past year, Native Hawaiian leader Dr. Noa Emmett Aluli, who was featured in *Islands of Sanctuary*, our film about the restoration of Kaho’olawe, which Emmett and others occupied in the 1970s in a successful campaign to stop U.S. Navy bombing of the sacred island. It was an early land back victory and a truly inspiring story.

In many ways Emmett made *Standing on Sacred Ground* happen. We first met at Thomas Banyacya’s kitchen table in 1979. Emmett had just occupied Kaho’olawe and he was embroiled in a court battle, charged by the U.S. Navy with felony trespassing. If convicted it would have prevented him from practicing medicine. After *In the Light of Reverence* came out in 2001, I ran into Emmett at a conference and, after seeing

the film, he said, “We might be ready to have an outsider tell our story.”

It took years, and many trust-building visits to Hawai’i, but eventually we succeeded. Along the way, Emmett’s core belief became a mantra in Hawai’i: “The health of the land is the health of the people. Take care of land, land takes care of you.” Emmett lived, practiced and taught *aloha ‘aina*—love for land.

A crowning achievement of our work together came in 2016, when the International Union for the Conservation of Nature’s World Conservation Congress was held in Hawai’i. It was a perfect opportunity to network sacred site guardians from around the world, and Emmett’s Protect Kaho’olawe ‘Ohana (PKO) rose to the occasion with abundant *aloha*. PKO members welcomed our large delegation, took us on a journey across the ocean from Maui to Kaho’olawe, held ceremony, told stories and shared valuable lessons learned on the sacred island. We produced a moving short film about the gathering, *Guardians of the Sacred*, which you can find on our website.



Death surely brings sadness, but we further the wisdom and spirit of these elders by keeping their memory and their stories alive. That is something I had not thought much about over the first few decades of the Sacred Land Film Project. It now seems urgent.

From Bears Ears and *Avi Kwa Ame* to the West Berkeley Shellmound things have changed. Land Back did not seem like a realistic suggestion over the first decades of this work. Now we have American presidents protecting sacred cultural landscapes, while using language asserting that networks of places of spiritual significance are worthy of national respect and care. Land all over the world is being returned to indigenous stewardship.

The elders have spoken and they have been heard. Their spirits are still strong.

As we ensure that these voices and stories live on through time, we are making history together.



## TRANSCRIPT

### Florence at the Spring—August 14, 1994

*Florence Jones in wheelchair, looking down at her sacred spring with rocks falling in haphazardly and New Age crystal offerings in the water.*

**FJ:** That ruined my heart. When I got here, I felt "the hell with it all, I'm going to blow my mountain up and tell the Great Creator to wipe that all out." That's what I had in my mind. That's why I needed 15 minutes (to pray to Cold Springs Mountain and Mt. Shasta) and that's what the Creator said, "Let's blow it up?" Do you want me to prove this?

**Crowd (softly):** No.

**FJ:** I can pull that string the Creator gave me to end the world. But I've got too many children, too many little ones. He put the people down to take care of nature. What hurts my heart is that loggers cut down my sacred trees just for the money, money, money.

**FJ:** I'm going to ask the white people. The great Creator was with me. My heart was almost failing with what the white people have done to my spring. That's why I asked my haunted mountain to be here with me. And the Creator says, "Do you want Mt. Shasta to blow up? If so, we'll blow it." Do you want the rocks to come down? I want an answer.

*Silence.*

**FJ:** Do you want the mountain to blow up? This mountain is disgusted. This is my church. I don't go down to you white people's church and go in there and raise hell. I don't want anyone to come here and ruin my church. Do you want to see it blow?

**Florence's attendant: (Off camera)** She wants an answer out loud.

**Crowd:** No.



**FJ:** Do my people want it to blow?

**Crowd:** No.

*Florence prays and Emerson Miles translates her prayer to Cold Springs Mountain and Mt. Shasta:*

**EM:** She told the Creator, "No, we don't want the mountain destroyed." She prayed for the young ones coming up, that they will carry on with this spring, to come here and pray and visit it after she leaves this world. She will be with us in spirit.

## TRANSCRIPT

### Emmett Aluli on Healing Kaho'olawe

We needed to do our homework, to reach back and know what the culture's all about, know our rights, know what the endangered species were, know what archaeological sites are, and to feel comfortable with all that.

We needed to get back and spiritually prepare for this endeavor.



We needed to go back with our practitioners—our *kahuna*—to open that place up, to ask permission of the gods and goddesses that were worshiped way back when, that took care in the form of land and ocean.

We needed to get permission from those spirits who still roamed that place and those who are still buried there. That's a very indigenous or native way of going back to land—you pay respect.

We needed to check with the elders

so that we were doing things properly, because they are the ones who bring that spiritual support for us. It's all part of healing. It's not just the medicines, but it's prayer. Part of success is the prayer that goes with it.

We needed to do that.



Emmett Aluli, Caleen Sisk, Danil Mamyev in Jeju, South Korea, in 2012 supporting local sacred site guardians