

# Sacred Nature

Sigrid Castañeda

*White people draw their words because their thoughts are full of forgetfulness. We keep the words of our ancestors inside our hearts, from long ago, and continue to pass them on to our children. The children, who know nothing about the spirits, listen to the shaman's songs and then also want to see them. This is how, although the words of the spirits are very old, they are always being renewed. They are the ones who enrich our thoughts. They are the ones who let us see and understand distant things, the things of the elders. In studying them, they show us how to dream.*

DAVI KOPENAWA

The deep connection with the land, nature, ancestors, and traditions characterizes the sacred practices of indigenous peoples. It is impossible to try to homogenize them, but they all share a deep connection with their environment, considering that each element that composes it is spirit and energy, *earth beings*.

Although there is a principle of spiritual connection with nature, as a result of the difficult changes to which the indigenous peoples have been subjected, a phenomenon of syncretism has arisen in the area of their sacred beliefs. This religious syncretism, the result of the convergence between indigenous sacred beliefs and the religions imposed by colonizers, missionaries, and other external influences, has taken various forms, from the incorporation of foreign elements into the original beliefs of the indigenous populations to the adaptation of religious practices. It has even given rise to new beliefs, fusing elements of local traditions with those imposed by the colonizers.

This process of religious syncretism has left a deep imprint on the spirituality of indigenous peoples, who, despite external influences, maintain their deep-rooted



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spiritual connection with the land and nature. Within this sacred context, rituals and ceremonies play a fundamental role in the life of indigenous communities. These practices, which are undertaken with the purpose of paying homage to the spirits, expressing gratitude for the gifts of nature, seeking spiritual guidance, and commemorating significant events in community life, usually involve elements like dances, songs, music, and offerings. Within the context of such ceremonies, expressiveness is maximized, which implies a transition from the most intimate to the public. This gives rise to a rich ceremony, in which the body, words, memory, music, and other expressions merge to create a sort of performative display that represents and exhibits the culture of these communities.

Indigenous religious ceremonies have a transcendental significance in multiple dimensions. They act as a guardian of the cultural heritage of communities, encapsulating myths, rituals, and teachings passed down from generation to generation. They also play a crucial role in cultural resistance and preserving the autonomy of indigenous communities, since they act as a form of resistance against the cultural assimilation imposed by colonizers and other external influences. Additionally, these religious ceremonies are deeply rooted in the connection with nature, since they impart vital lessons on harmony with the environment. These messages are increasingly relevant, in light of the global fight against climate change and environmental conservation, in which they have become an important voice.

## Mother - mountain

For many indigenous peoples, the earth is considered as a mother, a concept deeply rooted in their spiritual beliefs and worldviews, which they consider sacred and vital for survival and ways of life. This spiritual connection manifests in their perception of nature, animals, and the elements as divine manifestations, which are part of an intricate web of interconnected life. For these communities, the earth is not just a



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resource, but also a sacred entity with which they must maintain a relationship of respect and harmony.

As for the mountain, it represents not just a geographical environment, but also a sacred and spiritual entity, in which the Virgin Mary (a consequence of the imposition of Christianity in the colonial centuries) acquires a special character, since she acts as a bridge between two different cultures and religions.

The relationship with the earth forms a fundamental component of the cultural identity of indigenous peoples. Stories, myths, and oral traditions convey the importance of the land as an essential part of their heritage and legacy. This connection acts as a constant reminder of the need to preserve and respect the environment to ensure the survival of future generations.

## Origin, time, and memory

Origin stories play an essential role in the culture and identity of indigenous peoples. These narratives explain the origin of the world, of humanity, of the different creatures and natural elements, as well as establishing the fundamental norms and values of society. They serve as a way of transmitting ancestral knowledge, values, wisdom, and traditional practices from one generation to the next. Narrated orally, these stories have been kept alive throughout the centuries and they have also been represented visually.

In these narratives, it is often described how human beings and other life forms came from the earth and are deeply interconnected with nature. These tales reinforce the deep and spiritual relationship that indigenous peoples maintain with their territories and natural resources. They also play a crucial role in the cohesion of new generations



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by transmitting knowledge and values, and in resisting cultural assimilation in an ever-changing world.

## Vision

The visionary experience, which is achieved by ingesting sacred plants like the coca leaf, ayahuasca, yopo, angel's trumpet, or tobacco, has played a fundamental role in revealing the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. These sensory experiences consist of both phosphenes, that is, the lights and forms that appear when the eyelids are closed, and a mosaic of flashes and visual patterns that represent manifestations of visions, dreams, and experiences, which are translated into visual forms of great significance.

Among these representations, it is possible to discern the presence of mythical figures and sacred animals that personify deep and transcendental spiritual concepts in indigenous cultures. Unlike conventional thinking, which encourages opening one's eyes wide to see, indigenous wisdom calls for them to be closed to explore other ways of perceiving the world. These sacred images, laden with symbolism, enrich the understanding of the relationship between the earthly and the spiritual, providing a unique and enriching perspective that transcends a merely retinal perception.

By incorporating patterns and shapes that are similar to those observed during these visual experiences, paintings, sculptures, textiles, and other artistic expressions become a powerful means of symbolically and abstractly representing the sacred visions that emanate from the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. Colors, lines, and compositions are skillfully used to evoke the deep spiritual sensation and connection experienced during these visions. These artistic expressions give form and life to a set of signs, mythical figures, and sacred animals that embody spiritual



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concepts, while allowing the sanctity of these experiences to continue and to be shared in multiple, mostly plastic, forms.



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