
Introduction:
Ethnobiology, Religion, Nature, and Culture

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There are myriad intersections between the field of ethnobiology (defined as the scientific and humanistic study of the complex set of relationships of the biota to present and past human societies) and the study of religion, nature, and culture. From the beginning of the field of ethnobiology, a minority of scholars sought to articulate these connections but, for a number of reasons, it has not been a primary focus in most ethnobiological research. It appears that the critical tension within the field between the humanities and sciences is partially to blame for ethnobiologists not fully exploring the role of religious practices in human–environment interactions. While the interdisciplinary nature of ethnobiology has been a great strength, it has led to a practical need for many ethnobiologists to locate themselves within a home discipline as well. Especially within the biological sciences, ethnobiology has fought for recognition as a valid pursuit. This marginalization has likely discouraged researchers from pursuing connections between perceptions regarding the supernatural and the natural world, for fear their scholarship would appear unscientific. Even among scholars primarily aligned within the social sciences and humanities, ethnobiology has not always lived up to its integrative potential. In recent years, however, the field has both grown and matured considerably, which has increased diversity in approaches. At the same time, disciplinary boundaries within the academy have significantly diminished. One result of these trends has been that scholars have increasingly begun to focus on the topic of this special issue, *Ethnobiology, Religion, Nature, and Culture*. I should note, however, that this is not the first time that the *JSRNC* has explored the

subject, so I would encourage readers to peruse previous issues for additional interesting and groundbreaking articles.

The impetus for this special issue lies in a symposium of the same name held from 11–12 November 2010 at the University of Florida. The organizers were John Richard Stepp (Department of Anthropology) and Bron Taylor (Department of Religion) of the University of Florida, along with Will Tuladhar-Douglas, Director of the Scottish Centre for Himalayan Research at the University of Aberdeen. The symposium engaged a number of leading scholars working with indigenous and traditional peoples worldwide in the fields of anthropology, biology, botany, ecology, geography, religion, and other associated disciplines. The focus was on a critical exploration of the relationship between ethnobiology, nature, and religion with a goal toward expanding our understanding of these concepts and how they influence knowledge and behavior cross-culturally. A larger concern was how a clearer understanding of these issues might contribute to the conservation of biocultural diversity worldwide.

Through the generous help of the Alachua Conservation Trust, a non-profit natural lands acquisition and management organization, scholars were housed at Prairie Creek Lodge near Gainesville, Florida. This magnificent setting adjacent to Payne's Prairie State Preserve allowed for extended conversations on the topic while experiencing some of the most significant landscapes of North Central Florida. The Symposium was held through the support of the Metanexus Institute and John Templeton Foundations, and at the University of Florida through the Division of Sponsored Research, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Departments of Anthropology and Religious Studies, and the Center for Spirituality and Health. The symposium was also sponsored by the *Ethnobiology and Critical Analysis of the Sacred* project of the International Conservation Union's working group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (www.csvpa.org).

The majority of participants in the symposium have contributed to this special issue. We were especially fortunate to lead off this issue with the input of a scholar who has been working on these issues for several decades and has done much to shape and influence the field: E.N. (Gene) Anderson, Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus, at the University of California, Riverside. He received his PhD in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1967. He has done research in several areas, especially Hong Kong, British Columbia, and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. His books include *The Food of China* (1988), *Ecologies of the Heart* (1996), and *The Pursuit of Ecotopia* (2010). Anderson's article entitled 'Religion in Conservation and Management: A Durkheimian

View' draws on his extensive field experiences and research to examine the role of religion with regard to sustainable environmental interactions, especially within traditional societies.

The next article comes from one of the new generation of scholars in ethnobiology, Erica Moret, who completed her PhD in 2007 while based at the University of Oxford's Centre for the Environment, after conducting twelve months fieldwork in Havana, Cuba. Her thesis focused on local to state level measures employed in Cuba to cope with the economic, political, and healthcare challenges linked to the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the intensification of the US trade embargo, which extended to food and medicine. Incorporating a focus on foreign policy, identity politics, religion, and environmental change, she drew on political ecology and geopolitical frameworks to examine Afro-Cuban ethnobotanical practices and knowledge from the colonial era to the modern day. She draws from this research in her article 'Hegemony, Identity, and Trans-Atlantic Modernity: Afro-Cuban Religion (Re)politicization and (De)legitimization in the Post-Soviet Era'. The result is a theoretically sophisticated case study that does much to illuminate current state engagements with traditional and syncretic religious traditions in Cuba.

A contributor who has been at the forefront of expanding the boundaries of ethnobiology is Jan Salick, PhD, Senior Curator of Ethnobotany at the Missouri Botanical Garden. She has been conducting ethnobiological research for more than 35 years in Southeast Asia, the Amazon, Central America-Mexico, the USA, and for the past thirteen years in Tibet and the surrounding Himalayas. Her academic pedigree includes a BA from the University of Wisconsin, Madison; an MS from Duke University; a PhD from Cornell University, a post-doc at The New York Botanical Garden, a tenured Professorship at Ohio University, and employment as a Senior Fellow at the University of Oxford, before she joined the Missouri Botanical Garden in 2000. She was trained as an ecologist, and her major areas of interest are ethnoecology of conservation, resource management, biodiversity, and climate change with numerous publications on these topics. Salick began her work on Tibetan sacred spaces after being influenced by a student at Washington University with joint majors in biology and religion (whom Salick reports has since become a Harvard-trained lawyer!). She has found that Tibetan sacred sites are areas rich in biodiversity; old-growth; demons; family-, community-, universal-, and spiritual-connectivity; and inspiration; and they may also mitigate climate change. This is the topic of her article, co-authored with Anja Byg and Kenneth Bauer, entitled 'Contemporary Tibetan Cosmology of Climate Change'.

Yet another scholar who has been instrumental in developing new approaches in ethnobiology is Jeremy Spoon, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Portland State University and Research Associate at The Mountain Institute. He received a BA in American Culture-Ethnic Studies from the University of Michigan and an MA and PhD in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa under the mentorship of the renowned ethnobiologist Nina Etkin. His research focuses on the influence of political economy on local ecological knowledge in and around mountainous protected areas. He has conducted research with the Khumbu Sherpa inside Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park, Nepal; among the Nuwuvi (Southern Paiute/Chemehuevi) around public lands in the Great Basin, US; with the Keekonyokie Maasai and Dorobo around Hell's Gate National Park, Kenya; and also with the Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) around Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, Hawai'i. He also has 15 years experience collaborating on participatory interpretation/education and resource management projects in Nepal, the United States, and Kenya. His additional research interests include environmental sustainability, place-based spirituality, applied anthropology, and linked quantitative and qualitative methods.

Spoon's co-author is Richard Arnold, Chairman of the Pahrump Paiute Tribe as well as spokesperson for the Consolidated Group of Tribes and Organizations that represent seventeen tribes and organizations within the Great Basin region. In 1977, Arnold became Executive Director of the Las Vegas Indian Center where he served until 2007. Arnold has numerous publications on Indian issues and a long career involving livelihood improvement for Native Americans. His work has had a broad impact and he has received numerous honors and accolades from a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations. Spoon and Arnold draw on their rich collective experiences in 'Collaborative Research and Co-Learning: Integrating Nuwuvi (Southern Paiute) Ecological Knowledge and Spirituality to Revitalize a Fragmented Land'. Spoon and Arnold persuasively argue for the importance of place-based spirituality and the role it can play in both revitalization and conservation.

The final contribution comes from Robert Voeks, Professor of Geography at California State University, Fullerton, and President of the California Geographical Society. He received his BS and MS in Geography from Portland State University and his PhD in physical geography from the University of California, Berkeley. He is currently Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Economic Botany*. His research, mostly based in Northeast Brazil and Borneo, focuses on ethnobotanical dimensions of globalization and changing Traditional Ecological Knowledge and the historical ethnobotany of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. He is author

of *Sacred Leaves of Candomble: African Magic, Medicine and Religion* (1997) and a forthcoming edited volume with Springer Press, *African Ethnobotany in the Americas*. Throughout his career, Voeks has innovatively explored the role of spirituality in ethnobiology and done much to expand and direct the field toward the topics covered within this special issue. His contribution grows out of his long-term research with Candomble healers and is entitled 'Spiritual Flora of Brazil's African Diaspora: Ethnobotanical Conversations in the Black Atlantic'.

In sum, this collection represents some of the most innovative and exciting research in ethnobiology today. The interdisciplinary nature of the special issue, drawing from the humanities, social sciences, and biophysical sciences, exemplifies the uncommon nature of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture itself. While many interdisciplinary societies exist, few seek to incorporate as many disciplines as this society. As this issue illustrates, the intellectual rewards and payoffs of interdisciplinary enquiry are significant when applied to topics such as the one covered herein. It is my hope that scholars will continue to find fertile and rich ground for understanding the complexities of our world and our species through reckless disregard for those who seek to police disciplinary boundaries. Onward!

References

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