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Exploring Spiritual Landscape  
in Sitka Alaska  
to Enhance Cross-Cultural Understanding

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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# Abstract

This thesis examines spiritual landscapes, illustrating their richness in understanding cross-cultural relations and revealing deeper cultural attitudes toward the environment. It also shows that spiritual landscapes hold visible and invisible remnants of the past, providing insights for intercultural relations today. The research is timely, building on the momentum of international and national efforts to better understand and preserve indigenous cultures and settler heritages. The collisions of diverse cultures during first contact (1400s to 1700s) left society with enduring intercultural challenges. Perspectives on colonial impacts range from culture annihilation and land dispossession to legitimate expressions of imperial power and politics. Regarding land issues, conflicts persist in ownership and management (e.g., legislation and treaties), preservation and designation (e.g., how and whose values apply), and use and access (e.g., equitable provision and regulation of rival commercial, community and conservancy interests). This thesis elevates earlier judgments to reveal insights into land issues focusing on multicultural contributions. The comprehensive approach used to study Sitka Alaska's spiritual landscape considers spiritual indicators including burial grounds, worship buildings, homelands, and place names, alongside lasting cultural attitudes toward such places (geomentalities). Indigenous Tlingit, Russian and American contributions to patterns of settlement and development of sacred places are revealed in the cultural layering (palimpsest) evident in the contemporary landscape. Using an inclusive comparable platform broadens Western discourses of spirituality, planning and land management. It recognises multicultural aspects evident in contemporary settings, including power relations and settler practices of appropriation and conquest that continue in planning instruments and perpetuated spatial preferences. Such observations, together with spiritual indicators and attitudes provide a comprehensive exploration of Sitka's spiritual landscape to celebrate several cultural heritages on equal terms. With globalisation and ongoing land conflicts this work urges planners, policy makers and educators to consider the value of adding geographic and spiritual dimensions to enhance cross-cultural understanding. Practical applications for a range of local and international settings and individual decision-making are presented for consideration.

## **Dedication**

With deep thanks to the invisible force that guides each of us, connects us, and gives us strength, without which, none of us finds our true north; and to my most precious gifts in life: the shared past, present and future with my Babtsa Anastasia, Mama Tatiana Antonia, Sistra Lara, and my dotchki, Sage Anastasia and Ella Marijana.

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Finally, I acknowledge my dear family and friends who have shared this journey by my side. Thank you for your love and support for which I am very blessed and most grateful.

## Preface

Cultural diversity, richness and misunderstanding exist on many levels. I was born in Canada, a country with a rich multicultural mosaic, different to our adjacent American melting pot. My heritage added to the cultural mix as my Ukrainian mother, an Orthodox believer, told the story of her marriage in 1966 to my father, a Croatian Roman Catholic. The mixing of religions influenced several close friends and family to boycott the wedding. As they were both Christians, I had difficulty understanding the conflict. I enjoyed taking part in both religions, perhaps since it meant celebrating Christmas and Easter twice. As a child, I was mesmerised at Easter Sunday mass at the Orthodox Church with my babushka (grandmother) carrying Easter baskets filled with pysanky (painted eggs), homemade sausage, paska (sweet bread), all wrapped in hand embroidered black and red cross-stitched linen. The svyschenyk (priest) would walk through rows of baskets with incense wafting through the open air. On warmer spring days, baskets were blessed outside following an all- morning mass that babushka used to go to faithfully, well into her eighties. On my father's side, my Croatian relatives in Canada and back home would tenaciously correct me when I referred to my Yugoslavian heritage (I was born during Tito's rule). I did not appreciate the distinction of my Croatian nationality until spending time in Zagreb in 1997 after the latest war.

As a geography major, I have always been drawn to land use and location theory, why people locate things where they do. Raised in a Western world and educated in a Western school system, my Master's thesis targeted Eurocentric location and economic theories to explain land use and value in transport settings. I had little exposure to East Asian location philosophies, so it did not occur to me to approach land issues in any way other than a Western framework. The presence of inherent cultural location bias became evident when I started working. For nearly 20 years, I have experienced cultural misunderstanding when working in planning, policy and consulting roles across Canada, New Zealand and Australia. In particular, indigenous cultural beliefs were repeatedly disregarded and superseded by Western translations and philosophies. Particularly around land issues, there appeared to be a repeating theme of cross-cultural difference and tension. Colleagues in the same organisation, government agencies with different

mandates, and interest groups, each participated in the conflicts over land issues. Given my geographic curiosity, I needed to take a closer look at culture and land to understand how and why these conflicts kept arising.

The question of how to bridge some of these cultural gaps and different ways of seeing led me to consider a culture's inherent belief systems and structures. While cultural geography theory goes some distance in contributing to understanding human/land relationships, I needed to delve deeper. Worldview provided a way to consider differences between cultures particularly as it pertains to a range of topics: our outlook on life, the world, beliefs on how to live, and other systematised views of worldly phenomena including love, life, death, priorities and values. In the mid-1990s, I came across writings of Hong-Key Yoon (1986, 1991) who introduced me to *geomentality* and the subconscious connections of a culture to the land. His research acted as a catalyst for this thesis topic providing a nexus for my various passions: cultural geography, location theory, religion and politics. But where to study?

A strong pull to the north precipitated a journey to Alaska via Canada's Yukon, in the early 1990s. I fell in love with the tundra, mountains, and craggy coastline. While I was fascinated by the colonial period and exploration, I wanted to select a study site that could yield practical applications for today. Enter Sitka, Alaska. From the first moment I saw the tourist brochure proudly displaying Saint Michael's Russian Orthodox Cathedral with gold onion domes, the Russian double headed eagle on the walking tour map, the indigenous Tlingit dancers and the billowing American flag, I knew I had found my ideal study site. Sitka was originally settled by the Tlingit people thousands of years ago, subsequently "discovered" by Russian *promyshlenki* (fur traders) in the late 1700s, and then "purchased" by the United States in 1867. Sitka holds both material and invisible lessons that challenge a uni-cultural interpretation of a diverse society. Interpreting Sitka's spiritual landscape identifies how sacred places aid our understanding not only of material cultural beliefs, but also of subconscious geomentality that resides in a culture's worldview. Examining cultural *cosmology* (or philosophy for understanding origin and the nature and structure of the universe) yields building blocks that assist to provide different lenses to examine history, colonisation and spirituality.

Bakhtin (1986:7) emphasises the importance of applying an outsider's perspective when understanding foreign cultures as "our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people," rather than seeing one side from within:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths.

It is through non-American, non-Russian, non-Tlingit eyes that I undertake this exploration of Sitka, Alaska. If this work results in one action, let it be to seek pause when engaging in land discussions: to raise new questions in how we regard deeper cultural meaning associated with spiritual places, and to consider how we might celebrate the diversity of our global society.



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ANB	Alaska Native Brotherhood
ANCSA	Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (1971)
CSPD	City of Sitka Planning Department
NHPR	National Historic Places Register (United States)
NPS	National Park Service (United States)
RAC	Russian American Company
STA	Sitka Tribe of Alaska
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WHC	World Heritage Convention