




# Sacred sites, identity, and resilience - on the retrieval of collective and historic identity across religious and cultural difference

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## Abstract

This study explores the role of eminent buildings and shrines of cultural and religious significance for collective and individual identities, in the context of present culture with its disruptions of tradition, in cultural and religious regard. It draws on the renewed awareness of this connection, that developed in public debate in France, after the arson of eminent cathedrals, and in Germany, in debate about the reconstruction of historic buildings after reunification. It also takes into view the role of 'sacred geography' in mystical traditions such as Yoga and Hesychasm, because these are on the rise, as forms of individualised and embodied spirituality, in present industrialised societies. The controversies are presented and viewed with regard to the changing contexts of secularisation, migration and religious plurality. The recent debates are understood as indication of a gradual recognition of the role of 'symbolic landscapes' and of the value of relating to them, for the sake of strengthening the bond with historical identity and heritage, as intrinsically connected. The growing or reluctant realisation that this includes the religious dimension, is noted – with both Christianity and Paganism. Theory about the symbolic function of eminent religious buildings is included. This is considered, in particular, with regard to religious and cultural pluralism as condition of reception, for a strengthening of a common and shared symbolic landscape, relevant to identity. It includes a view to 'pilgrimage' as mode of connecting to such sites. The essay also takes restored and rediscovered sacred sites in Africa into view. Here the disruptions and devaluation of historical identity due to colonialism is kept in view as background. Eminent examples of reconstructed shrines as centres of a spiritual and cultural geography, reinforcing collective and individual identity, are presented, as. An example of active appropriation of ancient sacred sites of previous populations is also mentioned, from South Africa, as means of cultural and spiritual 'territorialisation'.

**Keywords:** sacred sites, individual and collective identity, pilgrimage, symbolic landscape, restoration and historical identity

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on my presentation: *"The quest for religious roots in contexts of globalisation and secularisation: identity and resilience, with considerations for post-colonial contexts. Observations from Germany in view of the African realm."* at the: 2<sup>nd</sup> International Colloquium on Indigenous Religions of Africa. August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021, at the Institute of Cultural Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria; held in collaboration with: Pan-African Strategic & Policy Research Group (PANAFSTRAG), Lagos; Zimbabwe Open University, Harare; University of the Free State, Bloemfontein; University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, Kingston, Jamaica; University of Botswana, Gaborone; Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro; and the Universidade Federal da Bahia.



Collective identity is vital to the cohesion of societies, through the sense of belonging together, and through common values and culture that are shared. The concept goes well beyond an understanding of society as being merely a rules-based system for the common welfare of its citizens. The idea is subject to suspicion, as being opposed to the programmatic individualism that emerged as a core value through the 20<sup>th</sup> century – especially after the demise of strongly collectivist ideologies in East and West. The ‘West’ certainly regards itself as markedly ‘individualistic’ in orientation. In an age, where migrations have created more multi-ethnic, and multi-religious, societies, the idea of ‘collective identity’ is suspected of defending an (outdated) ideal of homogenous ‘nation states’, as proclaimed in the movement of national Romanticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a time when many smaller European nations and ethnicities finally gained their independent statehood, at the end of the ‘long 19<sup>th</sup> century’, after World War I. A long quest for symbols and expressions of collective identity marked that century, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The ideal was that the shared identity was rooted in common history, including the religious, language, art, music, descent, customs – and the markers of these in the landscape: of eminent buildings in a common ‘cultural landscape’. Connected to this view was the idea of a common ‘cultural sphere’ and ‘land’ in which the identity of the individual was harmoniously embedded in the collective identity, in mutual reinforcement.

From the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and after the historical catastrophes in Europe that harmed or even shattered this ideal of a collective ‘self’, the consequences of fragile individual identities became perceptible. In recent years, awareness of the role of shared visible symbols of collective identity – in its present state and its historic dimension – has grown: In France, in the aftermath of the arson of great cathedrals, in Germany by fierce public debate on the legitimacy of reconstruction of eminent churches and castles that had been destroyed in World War II, after German reunification, as symbols of national identity.

Both debates brought the role of such architectural symbols for the formation, expression, and fortification of collective identities to awareness – often in contested positions. In both countries, as sense of need to mind about collective identities, as necessary for the reinforcement of the collective sense of self, and of social (and cultural) cohesion has been expressed. The religious features of cathedrals and castles, have been subject to polemics from secularists, as re-imposition of Christianity in the public space. In the debates, the intimate connection between the historical and the religious meanings and symbolisms, of these eminent edifices became evident, and widely accepted, with exceptions. In the following these issues will be presented, with regard to their implications for the search for re-affirmation and esteem of collective identities, harmed by the experience of colonialism and subjugation, in Southern Africa, and in the process of ‘retrieval’ of the land, also in a spiritual sense.

### **The notion of ‘sacred space’ in Phenomenology of Religion. With a view to Christianity, and Hinduism, Yoga and Hesychasm**

Mircea Eliade, certainly the most towering scientist of religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, identified ‘sacred space’ as a key feature in all religions, in his phenomenology of religion. (Eliade uses the concept of ‘hierophany’ i. e. as manifestation of the powerful ‘sacred’ in this context.):

[in translation:] “The concept ‘sacred space’ contains the idea of a repetition of the original hierophany, that had consecrated this space, by transforming it, secluding it, by isolating it from the profane environment. The significance of the sacred space comes from the persistence of the hierophany, that had consecrated it originally. The hierophany thus not only effects the sacralisation of a piece of the homogeneous profane space, it also means a lasting presence of this sacredness: here, at this site, the hierophany repeats itself.” (Eliade, 1954:424)

Thus, he declares, that sacred sites to not only have a role as symbolising some past or present significant event or cultural value, but that they are meant to be visited as sites of the presence



of an original sacred event of enduring effect, thus to be experienced, by visitors who 'connect' to it at the consecrated site. The past – that is commemorated here – becomes 'present' to those who visit it accordingly, to merge with it and to enter its realm, inwardly and outwardly. (ibidem: 426f.) It is thus relevant to identity in its spatial dimension.

A further aspect is the notion of a sacred site as 'centre of the world' or as 'axis mundi' where heaven and earth meet. (Eliade, 1954, p. 431f. In another aspect, sacred buildings, such as churches, 'orient' the visitors to the site of revelation and epiphany of the sacred: Christian churches, by tradition are oriented eastwards, with the elements of the eucharist presented on the altar in ritual re-presentation of the sacred. In terms of geography, even individualised and mystical traditions have such axial sites: In Hinduism, and in Yoga, the Mount Kailash is such a site, because Shiva, the arch-yogin, resided there in the 'original time'. Thus, Stella Kramrisch retells, disclosing the symbolism of it:

"The Mountain in the cosmos of Indian myth was the centre of that cosmos; on its heights in heaven dwelled the great god. Shiva dwelled in Kailasa and also favoured Mount Mandara. These mythic sites on high, envisioned from the earth, were assigned to the north, the region of the pole star, the Himalayan region was its proxy on earth. (From him, issued Ganga, the celestial river, ... who flooded the heaven of Brahma. Thence she flowed on earth, vivifying and bringing into this world ... to let the flowing light from beyond into the world of man from the uncharted regions of transcendence..." (Kramrisch, 1981: 345).

For Hesychasm, the notion of the sacred mountain as 'axis mundi' is also significant. (It echoes the mountain in the desert of Sinai, where Moses ascended to encounter God (*Exodus* 19, 24 & 33). The most eminent theoretician of the Christian Orthodox meditation doctrine and practice of Hesychasm, St. Gregory Palamas (14<sup>th</sup> century CE), defines the centre of Hesychasm, Mount Athos as follows: He writes about an eminent master of Hesychasm of his age, that

"... he chose to adopt the most rigorous life, that of the monks, and to live in the place which bears the name of holiness, that is the Athos, the abode of virtue, situated on the border between this world and the Supernatural." (Palamas, 1338 - 41, *Triads*, II.2.1)

This definition of Mount Athos, with its communities of monks, many of the Hesychasts, as located on the boundary between heaven and earth, situates this site in a spiritual geography. The fact that this site is visited by pilgrims from far and wide to this day, who go there for retreats, indicates its sacred nature, that is relevant to the symbolic cosmography of Orthodoxy, and their communal identity, to this day, as a site where to connect with the divine. The individual hesychasts, who chose their hermitages in symbolic 'deserts' their abodes represent both this mountain of 'divine ascent' and its surrounding desert (Climacus (6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century. CE), *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 27). The same applies, in analogy, to the secluded hermitages of the Yogins. The relation between both, comprising the sacred mountain as 'axis mundi', and the desert of solitude around, remain to be further explored. This excursus is included here, because the development of Western societies in particular, to the individualised spiritual doctrine and practice of Yoga, but also of Christian mysticism, make it necessary, to show that the idea of 'sacred space' is also essential to these. It provides a pathway of access (and understanding) to the heritage of Christian churches, and cathedrals, in post-secular societies and milieus, at present.

### **Access via C. G. Jung's concept of the 'collective unconscious' and its cultural aspects.**

The psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung developed the idea of a 'collective unconscious' against this background, from World War I onwards (Jung, 2016). With this concept of a tiered unconscious Jung sought to combine the common human heritage of shared archetypes with the individual unconscious. On the background of Romanticism, and its philosophers, from



which he drew (Ellenberger, 1994, p. 665), the collective entities of cultures are in between these two poles (ibidem, p. 705ff.). In this field, cultural symbols are understood as projections of the common, collective unconscious, which, in turn, activate and reinforce its figures (Aurigemma, 2009: 60f.). Thus, a mutual relation is constituted that shapes the individual and the collective community, participating in these symbols. This may be applied to shrines and churches – visible in the environment, and imprinted in common cultural knowledge - that appeal both to the common human and to the culturally specific ‘layers’ of the collective unconscious. By implication, these have an eminent role for the constitution, formation, and activation of the collective and individual identities. In Jung’s view, as in those of the philosophers of Romanticism, religious symbols are manifestations of the ‘collective unconscious’ too. This implies that, in principle, they are universally accessible, by intuitive *aisthesis*.

### **Johann Gottfried Herder as philosopher and theologian of cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity: appreciating Folk cultures, and Pagan religions as manifestations of the Divine**

The psychoanalytic approach of perceiving churches and other eminent buildings as symbols of the soul, goes back to the thought of Romanticism, and into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Lutheran theologian and philosopher Johann Gottlieb Herder (1744 – 1803) proclaimed the unique value and identity of each language and of each cultural community (Forster, 2019). He conceptualised them as unique collective personalities and creation of God.

Herder was influential as philosopher of culture ever since, developing ‘hermeneutics’ as the art and science of interpreting a text from its own features and horizons of culture, language, religion etc. His influence sparked the movement of ‘national Romanticism’. With the onset of modernity and industrialisation, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the folk cultures, including their Pagan elements, that were perceptibly threatened, received enthusiastic attention and diligent study in the spirit of ‘national Romanticism’, all over Europe, up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and beyond. This inspired a re-evaluation of the Pagan heritage as essential symbolic expression of a multitude of ethnic and cultural collective ‘personalities’, as well as to a re-appraisal of the Christian Middle Ages, especially of the Gothic cathedrals, which had been despised in Enlightenment, as irrational, and as inferior to the ‘classicism’ of Roman Antiquity.

In the contexts of transformations by globalisation, colonialism, and other forces, including rampant secularisation, this appreciation of the symbols of a ‘spiritual landscape’ through different layers of religion, helps to the restoration and healing of collective sense of self. They unite people of diverse religious, spiritual, and even non-religious convictions.

### **Collective identity, sense of self, and psychological resilience – the role of religion**

Collective and individual identities are determined by memory. Remembrance of events and developments that have shaped the collective entities, to which we belong - our nation, our ethnic community, our clan, our region, our religious community, our institution of work, our families, etc. - are vital to our sense of self. A secure, well-rooted, and developed, sense of collective identity, has been rediscovered, as vital to the psychological resilience of the individual, in recent decades. The context for this re-appraisal is research on the effects of Islamist terror attacks in Western countries. (The message of the jihadists appears to be, that Western countries are internally weak, with fragmented and diffuse religious and collective identities, and therefore vulnerable to terror.) This has become a field for systematic research, in several disciplines (Schlegel, 2019-10-21). The role of firm, well-developed collective identities for individual sense of self and resilience, is being researched. On this background, symbols, such as eminent buildings and sacred sites, represent history and identity in the public space. They are visited and kept in collective memory as ‘icons’, even by those who may not adhere to the religious faith or political ideas that they represent. Yet they are received as symbols of collective identity.



## The arson of cathedrals in France and awareness of their role for the collective identity

This aspect came into awareness in France with the arson of the cathedrals Notre-Dame of Paris, in 2019, and soon afterwards, also of Nantes, in 2020. The effect was a wake-up call. The strongly secularised society of France understood, that a prime symbol and monument of its predominantly Roman Catholic identity and of its political history as a nation, had been nearly destroyed. This has been perceived as a wake-up call (Badré, 2019-04-24). One of the participants in this public debate, Vincent Badré, wrote that “the foremost church of Paris became one great sick body, and it is by this body that the link between the history and the future is being restored” (ibidem). In this quote the metaphor of the body, in its temporal dimension, thus of a ‘living body’, is important. It relates this cathedral to the individual ‘body’ of the (French) reader, and to the collective ‘body’ of France, perceived as a living entity, existing in time, with origins, history and future, and identity,

The arson of Notre Dame de Paris, and of Nantes, are perceived as assassinations on the living bodies of the French and on their identity. Badré, like many other, indicate that this link has been neglected – as evidenced by lack of protection for these ‘shrines’, cathedrals in particular, whose maintenance is the responsibility of the state of France, since Napoleon’s concordat of 1834, that ended their horrific destruction in the French Revolution. The immensely expensive reconstruction of Notre Dame became a collective effort of the state and of donors. This brought the significance of sacred shrines for collective identity and memory to general awareness. By implication, the limitations of France’s political ideal of ‘laïcité’ - the banning of religion to the private sphere - became obvious.

Many churches and sacred sites in Europe were originally Pagan. They also re-present the Pagan stratum of European societies, and conserve some of their heritage (Kleinknecht, 2012, p. 306f.), even in the rituals, continuing to be practised there, and the phenomena documented of them. This applies e. g. to the eminent sanctuary of Lourdes (Mora, 2021-11-29). The debate involved renewed reflections on the role of France’s cathedrals for collective identity, and thus for the common and individual sense of self, under these conditions, and France’s constitutional ‘laïcité’. Thus, an article in the leading French architectural journal *AMC (Architecture Mouvement Continuité)* declares:

[in my translation:] “Under the effect of globalisation and migrations, the towns have definitely become foundries of religious pluralism, but characterised by a disturbance of traditional frontiers between faith, practice and appearance to a community. In addition, the number of practitioners diminishes, and the ways of life are largely secular. If numerous master-works of architecture, around the world, may be considered pure products of religion, what does it mean to construct a sacred space? [...] Is it about reproducing the archetypes of the past, to construct an of ‘what cannot be expressed in words’, as Corbusier defined it, to imagine secluded spaces, or, in contrast, open to accompany a moving population? [...]

With regard to the collective emotions aroused by the arson of Notre Dame de Paris, the crystallization of debates about the reconstruction of its tower – its visible sign – raises questions beyond the aspect of national heritage. [...] a building of religious worship today has to be thought as an architectural interface which expresses a social vision in its pluralistic acceptance.” (Bialestowski, 2019-09: no. 280).

This quote combines the issue of Notre Dame de Paris, as symbol of national heritage and identity, with reflections on the meaning and acceptance of buildings of worship – both old and new – in a religiously pluralistic and largely secular society. It takes the aspect of ongoing reception into view. It also calls for sacred architecture that is widely understandable:



“Although the terms are manifold, to designate a site of worship (church, mosque, chapel, temple, synagogue, pagoda, etc.), which the liturgies have evolved, it is certain to state that these buildings share, always, very similar typologies, on an axis of a play with light and a graded ascent to awaken a feeling of piety. Essential elements ...” (ibidem).

This passage reminds of archetypes of architectural symbolism, understandable from the perspective of different faiths. The ‘readability’ of the religious symbolism needs to be taken into view in an increasingly secular and religiously diverse society. Alice Bialestowski argues for a combination of common archetypes of spiritual symbolism that is rather universal, and specific cultural symbolisms of religious edifices. One may add, that education about this symbolism in schools may be a requirement for their understanding, and a public task. Thus, mnemotechnical role of cathedrals, to represent national history visibly in public space and to keep it in memory, can be facilitated.

### **On connecting to eminent sites, such as cathedrals and shrines: on pilgrimage as initiatory experience**

This relates to the manner in which such eminent sites are approached: emotionally, by the aesthetic grandeur of these magnificent cathedrals, with their overwhelming dimensions and aura – and practically, ritualistically, by ‘pilgrimage’ to them, be it on a Roman Catholic pilgrimage, or an aesthetically or historically motivated visit, as a tourist, in order to connect to them, and to experience them, with their ‘aura’. The cultural landscape is internalised by identification with it. Bruno Maes writes about this aspect [in my translation:]

“The sacred space is central. The mediating object (statue, relics, tableau ...) has left profane use and is enrobed with sacrality. All pilgrimage is situated in sacred space. In profane experience, space is homogenous, but this does not apply to a hierophany (like an apparition of Mary, for instance...) where a centre is constituted, that is created by a manifestation of the sacred. (...)

All access to this ‘centre’ has an initiatory value, because it allows to pass from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral to the enduring. [...]

The sacred time of pilgrimage also allows to regain original purity (...)

Thus, pilgrimage becomes symbolically the time of a spiritual rebirth.” (Maes, 2016, p 11f.).

The concept of ‘pilgrimage’ can also be applied to its secular form of ‘cultural tourism’, if an inner connection is sought. Considering that such sites are sometimes visited in crucial moments of life, as for prayer, this aspect is relevant to individual identity as well. A view to the ‘life’ or living dynamics of such sites, therefore needs to reach out beyond the circularity of constructionism, and to include the phenomenological too. A brief example may be cited, to illustrate the present dynamics of the sanctuary of Fatima, that is eminent and significant to Portuguese religious and cultural identity:

Portugal’s world-famous and accomplished singer of Fado, Marisa (Mariza) dos Reis Nunes (born 1973), told the following personal experience: her son was born prematurely, at six months, with a grave defect of the lungs. His condition was critical, with very poor prospects of survival for more than a few days. Marisa went to the sanctuary of Fatima, which up to that point she had considered to be a ‘commercial operation’. She prayed her heart out: [in translation] “[In this event that happened because of my son, in the Sanctuary of Fátima, I sensed that I was talking with a mother, and as a mother to a mother.” (Martins, 2016-05-16).

Mariza reported that her son did survive, with marked change to improvement, following her pilgrimage, to full health, after a year. Important in this personal report are the agency of the Mother-of-God, at this site, the personal experience, and the inner and outer phenomena, observed by Mariza dos Reis Nunes. To side-line these critical features, also reported since



ages from other sites of this kind, would be theoretically deficient. (The limitations of reductionist 'constructivism' may be exemplified here. The challenge for theory remains, to integrate these aspects.).

The dynamics of vital sanctuaries, manifested by pilgrimage, the emergence of new sites, and attempts at revival of such sites – from different religious and cultural perspectives – are important to collective and individual identities – healing included in many cases. Their theoretical assessment influences, how a society protects, restores, and manages such eminent sites, as symbols, in the common cultural landscape.

### **The case of Germany: healing a damaged collective identity, and sense of self, by restoration and rebuilding of destroyed churches and castles**

Although the philosophy of Herder, and subsequent broad research into Germany's cultural and religious heritage, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century – of which the Grimm brothers are early paragons – created a vast collection, for a profound and differentiated sense of identity, rooted in a rich cultural heritage, Germany, at present, after World War II, has a deeply damaged sense of collective identity. To many present Germans, their lineage of historical identity ends in 1945. Cultural history, before the nefarious 12 years of National Socialist rule, appear as distant 'pre-history'. This has been noted in research, and in public views of neighbouring countries about German 'shame of themselves'. The flight of many post-war Germans into surrogates of identity, such as being primarily 'European' or 'Western' has been met with bewilderment. The British historian and BBC correspondent, Peter Watson introduced his voluminous cultural history of Germany, with an assessment of this identity crisis:

"Opinion polls in Germany showed that while 80% of Americans were proud to be Americans, ... only 20% of Germans were proud of being German (...) Germans were 'obsessed with guilt', and that this obsession was interfering with their ability to develop a sense of national identity, which by implication had political and cultural consequences." (Watson, 2010, p. 12).

Peter Watson is certainly right to quote the metaphor of the patient in therapy. The deeply disturbed sense of self has not been healed. The widely observable tendency of Germans to flee this predicament, by embracing vicarious identities, such as being a 'European', to supplant their problematic Germanness, may confirm it. The burden of a sense of history, that reaches no further than the 1940's catastrophe is evidently unbearable to many. After German reunification some healing of German sense of identity, is observable (Wilds, 2000, pp. 279ff.). This partly due to the different 'culture of identity' practiced in East Germany, which understood itself to be the heir to the progressive movements in German history, the socialist and communist, but also earlier religious movements, like the Reformation or Pietism, cultural movements, like the German classics, and social movements. With its programme of 'heritage research', a positive sense of identity was created, of being rooted in German culture and history. Even after the reunification of Germany, these traditions persist

The debates crystallized about the reconstruction of the Berlin City Castle – the former residence of the kings of Prussia – that had been completely torn down after damages in World War II. For some it represented Prussian imperialism. Others took offence at the symbols of Christianity, such as the cross on its tower, and a band of biblical mottos encircling it (Thierse, 2023-10-16).

### **The healing role of symbols of collective heritage: phenomenology and agency of sacred sites**

The restoration of symbols of German historical and religious monuments represents 'symbolic healing'. The controversial reconstruction of the main church of the Kingdom of Saxony, the 'Frauen-Kirche' in Dresden, is another example. In this context, since reunification



in 1989, another movement began: Interest in pre-Christian sacred sites. Some of these had been taken over by the Christian Church, during Christianisation in the early Middle Ages, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, others have been rediscovered and excavated by archaeologists. Gisela Graichen was one of the first in Germany to describe such sites for the whole country, in a well-researched researched popular book (Graichen, 1999). A whole genre of such books has developed since then, also academically (Kozljanić, 2004). They were complemented by theoretic expositions about the 'spirit of the place', the 'genius loci', as by Olivia Kleinknecht (Kleinknecht, 2012, pp. 303ff.). I myself have contributed to this genre, with perspectives of history of religion and of culture, in guides to (sacred) 'sites of power' (Körner, W., (ed.), 2016, 2022), also academically, regarding the retrieval of Pagan origins (Kleinhempel, 2017, p. 67ff.). Observable is, that such sites have their 'agency', as is experienced by visitors, who including their 'aura', and special phenomena. These aspects are significant, besides the semiotic symbolism of 'constructed meanings' - often denounced as 'essentialism' from constructivist perspectives (Van Beek, 2014, p. 41).

### **A view to African sacred sites**

Such interest is not confined to Germany. There are similar publications elsewhere, as in South Africa, e. g. by Mogomme. A. Masoga (Masoga and Nel, 2014, p. 71ff.). Systematic features of 'sacred space' and sites have been investigated for African Traditional religion here (Nel, 2014, p. 279ff.). This includes research into the histories and meanings of specific sites (Ngobese and Masoga, 2019, p. 292ff.). Such sites have cultural, political, and spiritual or religious significance. In South Africa, 'land ownership' is a highly sensitive and symbolic issue. To identify traditional sacred sites, and to provide access to them, is important in many ways. If such sites are visited as elements of the own history, this means to reinforce one's identity by reconnecting with its roots. It is also a means of bonding spiritually with the land. Sacred sites can have meaning not only to the adherents of the faith that they are presently dedicated to.

An eminent shrine is in Oshogbo, near Ile-Ife, in Nigeria (Oluwole-Olusegun, accessed 2023-12-29). Here, the restoration of the eminent temples and sites - close to the symbolic 'navel' of Yoruba cosmology – emerged from a movement of retrieval of sacred sites, as by the artist Susanne Wenger. The restored shrines fulfil cultural and religious roles, for adherents of traditional Yoruba and Afro-American religions, as well as for Christians, as sites of symbolic heritage (Ogundiran, 2014, p. 173ff.). They are visited by pilgrims from Nigeria, Latin America and beyond, to reaffirm ethnic, cultural or religious bonds, in affirmation of living tradition, by participating in the rituals there at the festivals, that attract thousands (Oluwole-Olusegun, 2013). Similar developments are going on in Ghana too (Nrenzah, 2015, p. 170ff.). Pre-Christian sacred sites are adopted, and consecrated anew, in South Africa, by Christian churches, especially of the African initiated or Zionist branch, such as caves of the San, or Hillside, in the Cape Peninsula, by mostly migrant workers, who thereby enroot themselves spiritually in the land. (Kleinhempel, 2021).

The emotional experience of visiting such sites, and of connecting to what they represent, has its intrinsic effect, and shapes perceptions, even if merely subliminally. In terms of 'politics of identity' they are most important. It can be observed, that changing attitudes to such sites, as by initiatives to their restoration, indicate changed politics of identity, even before the official discourse changes to follow suit.

### **Assessing Christian symbols from a non-Christian or universalist perspective: The role of Pagan religion and of Christianity for the evolution of German identity**

For Germany, the oldest sites have a special significance of identity: German culture developed out of the successful anti-colonial struggle against the Roman Empire for five centuries. In the early stage of resistance, two Germanic chieftains who had been educated in Roman literature culture, administration, and military, were eminent: Marbod and Arminius.





Without their courage and determination, the German language would probably have vanished by assimilation, after Roman conquest. When the Frankish kings of the Merovingian dynasty wrested power from the Roman Empire, around 460 CE, they commissioned the Roman Catholic Church with the introduction of a culture of writing, of science, literature, philosophy, and system of education. The Roman Catholic Church founded institutions of learning, that evolved into universities, developed institutions of social welfare, and structures of communication and of administration, and a host of other features, that lay the foundation for the development of the Medieval Christian culture, in the realms of Germany, France, and neighbouring countries. The issue of cultural self-determination came up again, forcefully, with Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German, and the Reformation. He compared himself to Arminius. In the following centuries, of territorial and confessional fragmentation, the Churches remained essential to embody the cultural identity and traditions of the country, besides the academic institutions, and the forms of folk culture. From the 1800's onwards, Gothic cathedrals were hailed, as symbols of a common spiritual and cultural heritage, as symbols of national culture and identity, distinct from the Roman.

### **Conclusions for African contexts, especially Southern Africa**

The roles of, Paganism, and then, of Christianity, for the development of national identity, need to be understood, and re-appreciated in present times. The debates in France, reflect similar insights – often in a painful revision of secularist common opinions. Similarly in Germany. The same may be applied to the post-colonial situations in Africa too, as to the contributions of Christianity and Pagan indigenous religions, in pre-colonial and colonial history, to the formation of present identity. Symbolic, and sacred, sites require reception, as in a symbolic landscape, visitation, and commemoration, for collective identity, rooted in history.

The disruptions and the devaluation of the sense of collective identity, and its tradition, brought about by colonialism – but also by modern 'de-territorialisation' - calls for a deliberate retrieval of sacred sites, and of eminent symbols of religious and cultural heritage, to strengthen collective identity. The challenges by change of religious adherence, and by disruption of lines of tradition, need careful reflection. Nevertheless, the importance of 'enrooting' oneself in a spiritual landscape – of the common life-world and environment– can be understood as a necessity, also for those, whose symbolic genealogies, determining their identities, derive from elsewhere or are primarily located there. A multiplicity of symbolic landscapes, relevant to identity, may be acknowledged. It is widely recognised, however, that deliberate (re-)connection to eminent symbolic sites is beneficial to the sense of individual and collective identity and social cohesion, in consequence. as shown above. Thus, it is necessary to protect, restore, and visit such sites, as may be done from different religious, cultural and ethnic perspectives. It applies to Christian, and Pagan, sites alike. It also calls for a look at the symbolic space in individualistic spiritual traditions like Yoga and Hesychasm, their representation and enactment, as hermeneutic basis of access in a post-secular society, to facilitate re-connection to the common symbolic space and shared realm, for an identity 'territorialised' (Van Houtum, 2010: 377f.) in history and religious heritage.

Considering, that 'hierophany' is not a process that is concluded – as belonging to a past of mythical mind-set, the ongoing process of sacralisation in recent history, and the present may be kept in mind too. This is of interest for the understanding of and appreciating the cultural sites with spiritual significance, of heritage and of present culture. To communicate this is a contribution to ongoing cultural esteem and understanding of the importance of these sites, ideally for all members of society. The theoretical understanding of this complex can thus contribute to societal discourses, towards the appreciation, strengthening, healing, and developing deepened understanding, of these symbols and sites, relevant to collective and individual identities.



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