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Reviewed by: Roopa Madhav, PhD Scholar, SOAS, University of London

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VOLUME
16/1

LEAD Journal (Law, Environment and Development Journal)
is a peer-reviewed academic publication based in New Delhi and London and jointly managed by the
Law, Environment and Development Centre of SOAS University of London
and the International Environmental Law Research Centre (IELRC).
LEAD is published at www.lead-journal.org
info@lead-journal.org
ISSN 1746-5893

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This advance version of the book review can be cited as
Book Review: John Studley, *Indigenous Sacred Natural Sites And Spiritual Governance: The Legal Case for Juristic Personhood* (Routledge Focus 2019),
16/1 *Law, Environment and Development Journal* (2020), p. 5,
available at <http://www.lead-journal.org/content/b1602.pdf>

This book can be purchased directly online here

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Environmental governance (or more broadly the discourse around law and governance) rarely dips into the world of spirituality. This book is a unique contribution set to enrich the governance discourse, informed primarily by a non-spiritual, secular approach. The rationale for the initial work, as the author notes, emanates from a personal epiphany while carrying out research in Tibet, but the impetus for this book is the need to rethink mainstream governance frameworks (particularly, the IUCN governance framework) that make assumptions of a 'spiritless' governance of sacred natural sites (SNS).

Spiritual governance of SNS is a distinct practice that protects critical biodiversity outside formal state protected areas. Protection of SNS is vital as it is a good indicator of the critical link between bio-diversity and cultural survival. As the author notes, 'SNS are nodes in a much larger ecological network and an integral part of the social fabric that permeates the whole landscape or territory'¹ In terms of scale and geographical spread, SNS are globally distributed and may aggregate to at least 8 per cent of the world's land surface.² SNS is also being classified as 'sacred commons' or 'spiritual commons'. 'As spiritual commons, SNS is meaningful due to the ritual practices that are performed and the relational ontology the local people have with the site, the resident numina and the pluriverse'.³

The author explores critical ideas of spirituality that predate modern environmental governance debate and demonstrates through a case study of SNS in Tibet, the need to embrace a more pluriversal approach. The book takes on more significance in the light of recent court rulings and legislation granting juristic

personhood to indigenous homelands, mountains and rivers in New Zealand, India, Ecuador and Colombia. The primary argument put forth by the author, an ethno- forestry researcher, in this slim volume is that SNS and their resident 'spirits of place' need recognition as juristic persons, in turn providing a space within mainstream law and governance frameworks.

In building his arguments, the author explains the conceptual basis for non-anthropocentric approaches to nature in Chapters 2 and 3. It provides an important insight into the philosophies, practices and spiritual ecologies that inform and underpin the rights of nature. While mapping this, the author places a useful cautionary note that to fully understand the governance regimes of another society, it must be located and understood within the local culture. It lays the foundation for the rest of the chapters, where the author brings to bear the need for a polycentric legal and governance framework. As he notes, this approach is not entirely new; most polycentric legal orders are contractual in nature and the 'adoption of polycentric post statist governance is particularly evident within the EU and environmental regulation since the 1980s'.⁴

SNS, predicated on profound cultural values and dedicated efforts by local/indigenous people,⁵ are exemplars of a different world view to nature. Legal systems, based primarily on Western conceptions, do not accord legal personhood to natural spiritual entities. The author in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examines legal cases and legislation that are now reversing this approach and granting 'juristic personhood'⁶ to rivers, mountains and forests.⁷ The post-anthropocentric approaches are not without their set of challenges and the author explores these in the three chapters. A quibble about the editing and the flow of the three chapters is in order here - the three chapters could have been merged for better reading and more cohesive

1 Pg 7.

2 Pg 7.

3 Pg 15.

4 Pg 16.

5 Pg 2.

6 'The concept of juristic personhood refers generally to a legal subject that is not a human being but one which society has decided to recognize as a subject of certain rights, protections, privileges, responsibilities and liabilities'. Pg 7.

7 Pg 7.

argumentation. Be that as it may, an important point made in these chapters needs highlighting. He notes that ‘the eco centric “rights” approach does not appear to resonate well with the worldview of the local people who protect most enspirited SNS’.⁸ The concept of ‘rights’, he further notes, is a ‘construction from outside an indigenous animistic context’.⁹ This observation leads me to my next concern with the line of argumentation adopted in the book.

While the author brings up the idea of spiritual governance juxtaposed against a mainstream idea of governance and law, it is somewhat baffling that the line of argumentation of the next few chapters is to find a foot hold and recognition within mainstream legal framework. The author notes: ‘It appears as if Indigenous legal practices by definition will have to remain subordinate to the knowledge-and power systems of “western jurisprudence”’. However, even through this lens, juristic personhood may offer ways for Indigenous people to engage with the dominant legal system’.¹⁰ Can we argue for spiritual governance to be understood within its own framework and lessons drawn from it to strengthen mainstream governance as opposed to co-opting it into the mainstream legal order only to be misinterpreted and codified in a format that leaves much to be desired. This is not dissimilar to the struggle that one faces with official customary law and living customary law, the latter requiring a different understanding and approach and not necessarily within a western positivist framing. Acknowledging the difficulties of subservience to the formal legal paradigm, would it be possible to argue cogently for a parallel universe to co-exist on its own merit.

Chapter 7 contains a detailed case study carried out by the author in Tibet, which provides deep insights into the behavioural context for the ritual protection of SNS. In his concluding thoughts and arguments, Chapters 8 and 9, the author argues for a rethink of the IUCN framework to provide recognition to

enspirited SNS and grant juristic personhood; as designated protected areas they can get standing in law. Simultaneously the author also argues that the strength in adopting a polycentric worldview is that it creates ‘space for acceptance of multiple worlds, invoking alternative epistemologies (ways of knowing) and ontologies (ways of being) in different worlds’.¹¹ This perhaps is the beginning of another book that explores the possibilities of an alternative legal paradigm.

The book straddles many worlds – law, governance, policy, ethnography and popular discourse – thus being available to a wide range of audiences. It is also a critical contribution to starting a conversation on the links between spirituality, ecology and bio-diversity conservation, to strengthen a-spiritual governance frameworks. In essence, it provides a basis for thinking about the post-anthropocentric approaches to nature, conservation, and governance.

8 Pg 15.

9 *ibid.*

10 Pg 82.

11 Pg 84.

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