MOUNTAINS have an important place in the symbolic geography of religious traditions the world over, although the ways in which mountains are significant have differed. Some have been seen as cosmic mountains, central to an entire worldview; others have been distinguished as places of revelation and vision, as divine dwelling places, or even as geographical manifestations of the divine.

Attitudes toward mountains in general have varied widely. Chinese poets such as Xie Lingyun (fourth to fifth century CE) and Hanshan (eighth to ninth century CE) were attracted by mountains through a sense that these peaks piled one upon the other led not only to the clouds, but to heaven. And yet in the West, the image of jutting mountain peaks touching the clouds has not always had a positive symbolic valence. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, Luther and others held the view that mountains appeared in an otherwise pleasingly symmetrical world only after the flood, which scarred the surface of the earth with “warts and poxmarks” and signaled the fall and decay of nature. Mountains were, in the view of the sixteenth-century English writer Edward Burnet, the ruins of the preludial world, a sign of chaos and fractured creation. However, in the late seventeenth century with the “aesthetics of the infinite” came a new appreciation of the splendor and height of mountains as stretching the imagination toward God. One writer of the time described his response to the Alps as “a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleas’d, I trembled” (quoted in Nicolson, 1959, p. 277).

The Cosmic Mountain as Sacred Center. As the center of the world, linking heaven and earth and anchoring the cardinal directions, the mountain often functions as an *axis mundi*—the centerpost of the world; it is a cosmic mountain, central to the order and stability of the cosmos. One of the most important such mountains is Mount Meru, or Sumeru, the mythical mountain that has “centered” the world of the majority of Asians—Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain. According to Hindu cosmology, four lotus-petal continents spread out from Mount Meru at the center and beyond them the seven ring-shaped seas and ring-shaped continents of the wider universe. Mount Meru rises heavenward as the seed cup of the world lotus. As an *axis mundi*, this mountain, rooted deep in the netherworld, rises high through the realms of heaven, where it spreads out to accommodate the cities of all the gods. Interestingly, Meru does not form a peak, for the geographical texts of the Puranas agree that Meru is wider at top than at bottom, true to both its seed-cup prototype and the polytheistic consciousness that accommodates many gods at the top. Meru has four sides of different colors (*nārāyan*) and is flanked by four directional mountains. Above Meru stands the polestar, and daily the sun drives his chariot around the mountain. The heavenly Ganges in its descent to earth first touches the top of Meru and then divides into four rivers that run in the four cardinal directions to water the earth.

As the center of the world-circle, or *mandala*, Mount Meru is symbolically repeated in many Hindu temples that take the mountain as an architectural prototype. The *śikhara* (spire or peak) of the temple rises high above the cavelike womb-chamber of the sanctum and is capped with the coggled, ring-shaped *amalaka*, the sun itself, a symbol of the heavens. The mountain is also repeated in the architecture of the Buddhist stupa, the reliquary dome with gateways in the four directions and a multi-leveled mast at the top marking the *bhūmi* (“worlds”) that lead to heaven. The mountain symbolism is most elaborately seen in the stupa of Borobudur in Java, which is actually built over a small hill. There one sequentially circumambulates the nine *bhūmis* of the cosmos to reach the top. In China and Japan, the vertical dimension of the stupa became attenuated in the structure of the pagoda and came to predominate over the dome-shaped tumulus of the reliquary. Even so, the pagodas of the Far East preserve the basic mountain symbolism of the stupa. In Southeast Asia, one of the many duplicates of Meru is Mount Gunung Agung, the great volcanic mountain that is at the center of the island of Bali. Throughout Bali, individual temples repeat the mountain symbolism and are called *meru*. Their nine roof-layers again signify the vertical dimensions of the cosmic mountain linking heaven and earth.

Like Meru, other mountains have been seen as cosmic centers. Mount Hara has a central place in the ancient cosmology of the Zoroastrian tradition. According to the *Zaγyay Yashri*, it was the earth’s first mountain, and its roots the source of the other mountains of Iran. Like other cosmic centers, it is the pivot around which the sun and the stars revolve, and like many other sacred mountains, it is also considered to be the source of heavenly waters. In Japan, the great volcanic peaks, among which Fuji is the most famous, have been thought to link earth and heaven. In Morocco, the great Atlas range in the territory of the Berbers is sometimes called the “pillar of heaven.” Mountains that center and stand at the quarters of a fourfold cosmos are numerous, as can be seen in the quadrant mountains of China and in the “Encircled Mountain” of the Navajo, around which stand four peaks, each identified with a direction and a color.

Mountains not considered “centers” in any cosmology still share this image of stability and permanence, of both height and unshakable depth. The *Book of Psalms* speaks of the “foundations” of the mountains and hills. Among the Yoruba, myths stress the durability of the hills and, therefore, their ability to protect. The Yoruba say “Ota okiiku,” meaning “The rock never dies.” In East Africa, one might receive the blessing “Endure, like Kibo.” Kibo is the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro and marks, for the Chagga people, the direction of all that is powerful and honorable.

In a similar vein, there are many traditions of the mountain that stood firm during a great flood. Mount Ararat in Turkey is known as the mountain where Noah found land and the ark came to rest. Among the Native American peoples of the Pacific Northwest, Mount Rainier was a pillar of
stability during the flood. Peruvian myths from the Sierran highlands claim the same for several of the high peaks of the Andes.

The mountain as nature’s great link between heaven and earth has also been widely symbolized architecturally, as in the case of Meru. In ancient Mesopotamia, the seven-storied ziggurat, with its high temple at the top and its low temple at the bottom, allows for the descent of the divine. The pyramids of Mesopotamian civilization, such as the ruins at Teotihuacan, are clearly aligned to stand at the center of ceremonial avenues. The Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan is further aligned with Mount Cerro Gordo, which it duplicates.

Mountains of Revelation and Vision. There are many mountains that may not have a central role in cosmology but that are, nonetheless, places of powerful contact between the divine and the human. For example, on top of Adam’s Peak, or Śrī Pada (“auspicious foot”), in Śrī Lanka is a large indentation said to be a footprint. According to Buddhism, it is the footprint of the Buddha himself, matched by a similar imprint at Phra Sat in Thailand. For Hindus, it is the imprint of Śiva; for Muslims, that of Adam; for Christians, that of the apostle Thomas. In any case, the belief that the peak was once trod by one larger than life is held by the people of all four traditions who climb to the top on pilgrimage.

In the Islamic tradition, it was on Mount Hira on the outskirts of Mecca that Muḥammad heard the revealed word of the Qur’ān. At nearby Mount Arafat, the entire assembly of pilgrims stands from noon to sunset on the ninth day of the ḥajj pilgrimage. This collective act of standing, before God and around Arafat, is considered by many to be the most powerful moment of the ḥajj.

Mount Sinai, where Moses encountered Yahweh face to face, is one of the most striking examples of the mountain of revelation. There Yahweh appeared to the Hebrews as a storm, with fire and lightning, or as a cloud that covered the peak. And there Yahweh also appeared directly, when Moses and the elders ascended the mountain and “saw the God of Israel” (Ex. 24:10). In the Elohist and Deuteronomistic traditions, Yahweh appeared on Mount Horæb. There Moses encountered Yahweh in the burning bush. And there Elijah stood before the Lord, who, after the rock-breaking wind, the fire, and the earthquake, spoke to him as “a still small voice” (1 Kgs. 19:11–12). And Jesus was transfigured upon a high mountain, sometimes said to be Mount Hermon, and appeared to Peter, John, and James with a glowing countenance, in dazzling raiment, and flanked by Moses and Elijah (Mt. 17:1–8; Mt. 9:2–8; Lk. 9:28–36).

The mountain top is a revelatory landscape, its height offering both the vision of heaven and a broad perspective on earth. Mountain ascent is associated with vision and the acquisition of power, as is clear in the vision quest of many of the Native American traditions and in the ascents of the yamabushi, the mountain ascetics of Japan. In both cases, transformation, including spiritual insight, is part of the mountain experience. For the pilgrim who is not an adept, a shaman, or an initiate, the mountaintop still affords ecstatic vision. In the words of the great Chinese mountain poet Hanshan, “High, high from the summit of the peak, / Whatever way I look, no limit in sight” (Cold Mountain, trans. Burton Watson, New York, 1970, p. 46).

The Dwelling Place of the Divine. For the Hebrews, God’s “dwelling place” was surely not Sinai, the place of revelation, but Mount Zion, the sturdy, rocky mount of Jerusalem. Zion, neither lofty nor dramatic, was the firm foundation of Jerusalem, the “City on a hill.” Here God was said to dwell in the midst of the people. The awesome mountaintop, where God appears in fire and lightning, is replaced with the security and protection of a fortress mountain.

The hills of Canaan were the high places of powerful local ba‘alim, and Mount Zaphon was the abode of the great Baal Hadad. In the Ras Shamra Ugaritic texts, Baal describes his dwelling place “in the midst of my mountain, the godly Zaphon, in the holy place, the mountain of my heritage, in the chosen spot, the hill of victory” (Clifford, 1972, p. 138). Many of Zaphon’s traditions have likely become attached to Zion.

Perhaps the earliest evidence for mountaintop sanctuaries is in the Middle Minoan period (2100–1900 BCE) on Crete, where peak and cave sanctuaries such as those at Mount Juktas, Mount Dikte, and Mount Ida have been found, along with evidence of votive offerings to the goddess. In the Greek mythological tradition, Olympus is the dwelling place of the gods, especially of Zeus, whose cult was widely associated with mountaintops. Hermes, Apollo, Artemis, and Pan had mountain sanctuaries as well.

The hilltop and mountain shrines of both local and widely known gods are also important in the sacred geography of India. Śiva is called Giriṣṭa, the “lord of the mountains.” He dwells upon Mount Kailash in the Himalayas and has mountain shrines all over India, such as Śrī Sāila in André Pradesh and Kendara in the Himalayas. Śiva’s consort, Pārvatī, is the daughter of the mountain (parvatā), and she too dwells on mountaintops in countless local forms—as Vindhyāvasīṇī in central North India or as Ambikā at Girnār in Gujarat. Similarly, in South India, Skanda has hilltop shrines at Palki and Tiruttani, Ayyappan dwells on Mount Sabari in Kerala, and Śrī Venkatesvara dwells on the Seven Hills of Tirupati.

In China, there are four mountains that came to be associated with the four directions and four prominent bodhisattvas. Most famous among them is the northern peak, Wutai Shan, associated with Mañjūṣrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. When the Japanese monk Ennō visited Mount Wutai in the ninth century CE, it was a bustling center of monastic learning and of lay pilgrimage. The others are Mount Jiuhua in the south, Mount Emei in the west, and the hilly island of Putuo Shan off the Zhejiang coast in the east.
popular tradition, the bodhisattvas associated with these mountains were to be seen not merely in the temples but would take human form and appear as a beggar or an elderly monk to pilgrims along the way.

In addition to this group of four Buddhist mountains there are the five mountains of the Daoist tradition, again situated at the four compass points, with a center mountain shrine at Song Shan in Henan Province. Tai Shan in Shandong Province is perhaps the most famous of the five, with seven thousand stone stairs leading to the top where, next to the Daoist temple, a stone monument stands uninscribed but for the word di ("god"). The poet who was supposed to honor the mountain on this tablet was silenced by its splendor.

Mountains Charged with Divine Power. Japanese traditions recognize many mountain divinities—the yama no kami. In a sense, they dwell upon the mountain, but it might be more correct to say that the yama no kami are not really distinct from the mountain itself. In the Shintō traditions of Japan the separation of nature from spirit would be artificial. In the spring, the yama no kami descend from the mountains and become ta no kami, kami of the paddy fields, where they remain for the seasons of planting, growth, and harvest, returning to the mountain in the autumn. Even as the kami change locus, they remain part of the nature they inhabit.

In the Heian period, with increasing Shintō-Buddhist syncretism, the mountain kami came to be seen as forms of Amida Buddha and the various bodhisattvas, and the Shugendō tradition of mountain asceticism began. Among Japan’s important mountain sanctuaries are Mount Hakujo, Mount Gassan, Mount Yoshino, Mount Omine, and the Kumano mountains, identified with the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. Religious associations known as kō organize locally or regionally for the ascent of particular mountains, taking the name of the mountain itself (Fujikō, Kumanokō, etc.).

Many Native American traditions share this sense of the inseparability of mountain and spirit power. The peoples of the Pacific Northwest, for instance, often begin their tales with “Long ago, when the mountains were people. . . .” The mountains, such as Tacoma, now known as Rainier, are the mighty ancestors of the past. Farther south, the divine personification of mountains can be seen in Popocatepetl and his spouse Iztaccihuatl in Mexico or in Chimborazo and his spouse Tungurahua in Ecuador. The Zinacantecos of Chiapas still honor the tutelary ancestors, the Fathers and the Mothers, in shrines at both the foot and summit of their sacred hills. Among the Inca, the localization of power is called huaca, and is often manifest in stones or on mountains, such as the great Mount Huancacauri above Cuzco.

The mountain is the temple. Mount Cuchama in southern California, known as the Place of Creation, was one of the four exalted high places of the native peoples. For worship and initiation, it had no temple, for it was itself nature’s own temple. India has many such striking examples of divine mountains, among which is Arunācala (Dawn Mountain) in the Tamil lands of South India. This holy hill is said to be the incandescent hierophany of Siva and is reverently circumambulated as a temple would be.

Life and Death. As givers of life, mountains are the source of rivers and, thus, the source of fertility. This is made explicit in the relation of the mountain and rice-field kami in Japan. On the south side of Mount Atlas in Morocco, fruits are said to grow spontaneously. And on the mythical Mount Meru the divine trees are said to yield fruits as big as elephants, which burst into streams of nectar when they fall and water the earth with divine waters. As the prophet Amos said of the Land of Israel, “The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills will flow with it” (Am. 9:13).

Mountains are the source not only of nourishing waters but also of rains and lightning. Storm gods are often associated with mountains: Zeus, Rudra/Siva, Baal Hadad of Ugarit, Caraguila of the Incas, and many more.

Mountains, the source of the waters of life, are also seen as the abode of the dead or the path to heaven for the dead. Among the Shoshoni of the Wyoming, for instance, the Teton Mountains were seen primarily as the dangerous place of the dead. The Comanche and Araapaho, who practiced hill burial, held similar beliefs. The Japanese elegy literature makes many references to the mountain resting place of the souls of the dead. A coffin is called a “mountain box,” choosing a burial site is called “choosing the mountain,” and the funeral procession chants “We go to the mountain.” Throughout the Buddhist world, the stupa, which originally is said to have housed the relics of the Buddha, has become on a miniature scale the symbolic form in which the ashes of the dead are housed.

The Persistence of the Mountain. Through the ages many sacred mountains have accumulated many-layered traditions of myth and pilgrimage. Moriah, the mount of the Temple in Jerusalem, is a good example. First, it was an early Canaanite high place, a threshing floor and sanctuary for harvest offerings. According to tradition, it was there that Abraham came to sacrifice Isaac. AND it was there that Solomon built the great Temple, and Nehemiah rebuilt it after the Babylonian exile. And much later, according to Islamic tradition, it was there that Muhammad began his ascent from earth to heaven on his mystical “night journey” to the throne of God.

In Mexico, Tepeyac, the hill of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin, became the very place of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe when the Catholic tradition was layered upon indigenous traditions. Similarly, the great mountain-shaped pyramid of Quetzalcoatl at Cholula became, in the age following the conquest, the site of Our Lady of Remedios. In Japan, Mount Kous and Mount Fie, both charged with the power of their particular kami, became in Buddhist times the respective centers of the Shingon and the Tendai traditions. In countless such cases, the mountain persists as a sacred center, while myths and traditions change.
MOVEMENT FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF GOD

On March 17, 2000, several hundred followers (estimates vary, but there may well have been more than three hundred, including seventy-eight children) of the Ugandan Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTCG) died in Kanungu, Uganda, when their church was burned, in what was alternately called a mass suicide or a homicide perpetrated by the movement’s leaders. The subsequent discovery, in various locations, of mass graves containing the remains of people believed to be murdered (most of them stabbed) raised the death toll to 780 and possibly more, the largest such incident in recent history at that time.

The MRTCG, a fringe Catholic group, had been established among an epidemic of apparitions of the Virgin Mary and Jesus in Catholic circles in Africa, most of them not recognized by the Roman Catholic Church. These apparitions occurred during and after a series of famous apparitions in Kibeho, Rwanda, from 1981 to 1989. There, seven “seers” were encouraged and approved by the Catholic hierarchy. The apparitions that led to the formation of the MRTCG started in 1987, when a number of Catholics claimed to have had visions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in southwestern Uganda after Speciosa Mukantabana, a Rwandan girl who claimed a connection with Kibeho (although she was not one of the seven “approved” seers) moved in 1986 to the Ugandan diocese of Mbarara and later to the diocese of Masaka, starting a movement in Mbuye. Among the new Ugandan seers were Paul Kashuku (1890–1991) and his daughter Credonia Mwerinde (1925–2000), a barmaid with a reputation for sexual promiscuity. Mwerinde later claimed to be a former prostitute—probably a false claim and a conscious attempt to replicate the role of Mary Magdalene. Kashuku had a past as a visionary and claimed to have seen, as early as 1960, an apparition of his deceased daughter Evangelista.

Kashuku claimed to have had a particularly important vision in 1988, and he impressed, among others, Joseph Kibweteere (1931–2000), who claimed to have himself received visions since 1984. Kibweteere was a solid member of the Catholic community in Uganda. He had been a politician and a locally prominent member of the Catholic-based Democratic Party in the 1970s. Eventually, a community was established in Kibweteere’s home in 1989. The newly formed group attempted to merge the movement with other “apparitionist” groups, including the one established in Mbuye by Mukantabana (a group that had been condemned by the local Catholic bishop). These attempts failed however. A group of twelve apostles (six of them women) was appointed, and Kibweteere became their leader after Kashuku’s death in 1991.

See also Architecture; Center of the World; Cosmology, articles on Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain Cosmologies; Geography; Iconography, article on Buddhist Iconography; Pyramids: Stupa Worship; Temple, articles on Buddhist Temple Compounds, Mesoamerican Temples.

Bibliography


Evans-Wentz, W. Y. Cuchuma and Sacred Mountains. Edited by Frank Waters and Charles L. Adams. Chicago, 1981. An exploration of the significance of Mount Cuchuma in southern California, sacred to the Cohimi, Yuma, and other Native American peoples. Included also is a long chapter titled “Other Sacred Mountains throughout the World” that focuses primarily on the mountains of Japan, India, Central Asia, and North America.


Mullkin, Mary Augusta, and Anna M. Hotchkis. The Nine Sacred Mountains of China. Hong Kong, 1973. An illustrated record of the pilgrimages made by these two women in 1935 and 1936 to the five sacred mountains of the Daoists and the four sacred mountains of the Buddhists in China.

Nicholson, Marjorie Hope. Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite. Ithaca, N.Y., 1959. The classic Western study of attitudes toward mountains, including theological, philosophical, and emerging scientific dimensions. The focus of the study is the change in the view of mountains in the literature of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, from the view that mountains are the “Warts, Wens, Blisters, Imposthumes” on the face of Nature to the view that mountains are the grand natural cathedrals of the divine.

Diana L. Eck (1987)