



Among Saints, Enchanted and Orixás: a journey through the diversity of sacred natural sites in Brazil

Entre Santos, Encantados e Orixás: uma jornada pela diversidade dos sítios naturais sagrados no Brasil

Erika FERNANDES-PINTO^{1*}, Marta de Azevedo IRVING²

¹ Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio), Brasília, DF, Brazil.

² Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil.

* E-mail of contact: snsbrasil@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: Recognition on the multiple values of nature has been increasing in the recent decades in global forums on strategies for environmental conservation– including those considered as cultural. The so-called sacred natural sites, recognized in various parts of the world, have been gaining visibility as a key theme in the perspective on reconnecting society and nature. Amidst a substantial body of world information on the subject, it is noteworthy that references to sites in Brazil (a country of great biological and cultural wealth) are rare. In view of this situation, this article aims to illustrate the diversity of these Brazilian sites, its main characteristics, and socioenvironmental implications, evaluating how this theme has been approached in national surveys. The analysis was based on a bibliographical and documentary survey, driven by a collaborative strategy of knowledge construction. The results show that the recurrence of the manifestation of this phenomenon in the different regions of the country and its importance for many social groups contrast to its incipient recognition in public policies. Information on the subject is, for the most part, dispersed in non-indexed references to studies that permeate various areas of knowledge, often disconnected from the international debate. The reflection indicates a need to recognize the interdependence between culture and nature, based on interdisciplinary investigations and on theoretical approaches capable of promoting dialogue between scientific knowledge and popular wisdom, deconstructing these dichotomies. Finally, we launch an invitation to form alliances that contribute to the mission of unveiling the enchantment and mysteries of nature's sacred dimensions in Brazil.

Keywords: sacred places; cultural and spiritual values; collaborative research; nature conservation; ecological spirituality.

RESUMO: Nas últimas décadas, o reconhecimento dos múltiplos valores da natureza vem se ampliando nos debates internacionais sobre estratégias de conservação ambiental – incluindo aqueles considerados culturais. Nesse contexto, os denominados sítios naturais sagrados, reconhecidos em diversas partes do planeta, vêm ganhando visibilidade crescente como um tema-chave na perspectiva da reconexão entre sociedade e natureza. Em meio a um substancial conjunto de informações mundiais sobre o tema, chama atenção que sejam raras as referências a sítios brasileiros, país de grande riqueza biológica e cultural. Diante desse quadro, este artigo objetiva ilustrar a diversidade desses sítios no Brasil, suas principais características e implicações socioambientais, avaliando como essa temática vem sendo abordada nas pesquisas nacionais. A análise baseia-se em levantamento bibliográfico e documental, impulsionado por uma estratégia colaborativa de construção de conhecimento. Os resultados revelam que a recorrência da manifestação desse fenômeno nas diversas regiões do país, bem como a sua importância para muitos grupos sociais, contrastam com o seu incipiente reconhecimento nas políticas públicas. As informações sobre o tema estão, em sua maior parte, dispersas em referências não indexadas sobre estudos que permeiam várias áreas de conhecimento, em geral desconectados do debate internacional. A reflexão indica a necessidade de avançar no reconhecimento da interdependência entre cultura e natureza, a partir de investigações interdisciplinares pautadas em abordagens teóricas capazes de promover o diálogo entre conhecimento científico e sabedoria popular, desconstruindo essas dicotomias. Por fim, lança-se um convite à formação de alianças que contribuam com a missão de desvelar os encantos e os mistérios das dimensões sagradas da natureza na terra brasileira.

Palavras-chave: lugares sagrados; valores culturais e espirituais; pesquisa colaborativa; conservação da natureza; espiritualidade ecológica.

All the scholars who traveled throughout Brazil [...] fell in love with the richness of its infinite possibilities. Eminent geologists have defined the treasures of its soil and distinguished naturalists have classified its fauna and flora, marveling at their prodigious mysteries. In sheer eagerness, their analytical spirit was not able to go beyond the shallowness of mere appreciation, for they have not seen spiritual Brazil [...] in whose streets and roads, filled up with hope, the brotherly and generous people of Brazil carries on with its struggles, dreams and duties. (Chico Xavier, authors translation)

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the recognition of the range of nature wealth and its (direct or indirect) contribution to human well-being and life quality has been increasing in worldwide forums dedicated to policies for environmental conservation. However, it is still possible to observe in these forums a tendency to highlight the importance of nature concerning maintaining the biological richness and of its economic benefits through discussions

in which the exposition of scientific or utilitarian aspects prevail (Harmon & Putney, 2003).

However relevant these aspects may be, they appear to have little relation to the actual reasons why people care about nature. There is a different realm of non-material values that are part of the knowledge and world-view of various social groups that form cultural and symbolic links with natural elements. These links are still poorly understood, undervalued and often neglected in strategies on environmental resource management (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2010).

These values are often associated with specific places – such as mountains, volcanoes, caves, rivers, lakes, woods, trees, rocks, among others – considered by human groups as temples or natural sanctuaries, endowed with special energy or force that distinguishes them from the surrounding landscape. Commonly enveloped in an aura of mystery and magic, these enchanted places have been referred as sacred natural sites (SNS) in the specialized literature, being defined as “areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities” (Wild & McLeod, 2008, p. 20).

Religious sentiment and search for the transcendent are seen as inherent characteristics of peoples of all time and cultures (Eliade, 2010). In spite of the profound changes that humanity has undergone throughout its trajectory, spirituality continues to influence our daily thoughts and social activities, not necessarily in a formal and institutionalized way, but also as a type of belief in something that surpasses the materiality of the world, with deep implications in the way people perceive and interact with nature (Boff, 2008).

These themes, which may be considered as unconventional and are still not widely discussed in academic research – where they are often also disqualified –, have been promoted at forums held by global institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), as well as through the publication of several reference works. Through this debate, SNS identified in various parts of the planet have been gaining high visibility as a key

topic with regards to reconnecting society and nature and of recovering the sacredness of this relationship (Fernandes-Pinto & Irving, 2017).

In this context, some organizations have been promoting case studies and compiling information regarding SNS in different regions of the globe, which has enabled the development of an outline of the situation and the relevance of these areas in the contemporary world (Thorley & Gunn, 2007; Verschuuren *et al.*, 2010). Considering that many of these sites are threatened and subject to different types of pressure, international recommendations on the subject in recent years, have warned of the urgency of promoting concrete actions to protect SNS in their local environments. However, in spite of the worldwide debate, knowledge of this problem is still limited in many countries, and initiatives to map and safeguard these areas in national public policies are scarce (Wild & McLeod, 2008).

This situation seems to be the case in Brazil, a country “giant by thine own nature”¹ that combines one of the greatest biological wealth in the world and an expressive sociocultural plurality, considering its vast territorial dimension and variety of natural environments. It is estimated that 40% of the tropical rainforests and 14% of the world’s plant and animal species are located in this territory (Lewinsohn & Prado, 2005). In addition to its natural exuberance, the country also houses about 250 indigenous ethnicities (Ricardo & Ricardo, 2017) and hundreds of traditional populations represented by a diverse set of social groups of multiple origins with lifestyles adapted to particular environments. Aside from that, Brazil has received influxes of immigrants from different

¹ Excerpt from the Brazilian National Anthem, written by Joaquim Osório Duque Estrada, 1971.

countries through its history, leading to the development of a multicultural nation that also stands out for its rich religious diversity (Neri, 2011).

Considering the characteristics of the country and the fact that SNS combine nature and culture (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2010), the lack of references to SNS in the Brazilian context – amid a substantial body of global publications and databases on the subject – is remarkable. How could this apparent absence of information about Brazil within the international debate be explained? Which are the main sacred sites in the country and what are their characteristics? Have they been the subject of studies and/or safeguard initiatives?

These questions inspired the exploratory investigation on this subject and the creation of this article, which aimed to illustrate the diversity of SNS within Brazilian territory, as well as their main characteristics and socio-environmental implications, by investigating how this theme has been addressed in the Brazilian research. This analysis is based on bibliographical and documentary research conducted by a collaborative strategy of knowledge construction, which will be detailed further in this article.

At first, we will consider the methodology used to “discover” Brazilian sites, as well as conceptualizations and reflections on the term “sacred natural sites”. After that, we will enter the

rich universe of SNS in Brazil, evidencing some of its most emblematic examples. Finally, when assessing the scope of the discussion on this theme in the Brazilian research, we aim to identify the main challenges for protection and valuing of this national patrimony within the Brazilian context. The interpretation of the results was based on the theoretical framework of Social Psychology and Social Ecology, aiming to go beyond the simple factual dimension of the phenomenon and to form an interdisciplinary and critical view of this issue in contemporary times.

2. The challenge of discovering sacred natural sites in Brazil

In addition to research in annals of events of relevance on this subject – promoted by UNESCO and IUCN over the last decades² – and in worldwide databases on SNS³, as previously mentioned, a bibliographical research on Brazilian and Latin American scientific documentation websites⁴ was carried out, aiming to produce an inventory of records on these sites in Brazil.

For this purpose, several keywords associated with the theme were input into search engines of the websites previously mentioned, combining the words *sítios + naturais + sagrados* (sites + natural + sacred) and other similar and alternative

² International symposiums held in Paris (1998), China (2003), and Japan (2005); and workshops organized by Delos Initiative, held in Spain (2006), Greece (2007), and Finland (2010) – Annals available at: <<https://csvpa.org>>. For a chronology of worldwide events related to SNS and for a contextualization of the main topics and tendencies of the international discussion on this topic, we recommend the article *Sítios naturais sagrados: valores ancestrais e novos desafios para as políticas de proteção da natureza* (Fernandes-Pinto & Irving, 2017).

³ Sacred Natural Sites Initiative (<sacrednaturalsites.org>), Places of Peace and Power (<sacredsites.com>), Sacred Land Film Project (<sacredland.org>), Gaia Foundation (<www.gaiafoundation.org>), Alliance of Religions and Conservation (<www.arcworld.org>), Delos Initiative (<www.med-ina.org/delos>), The World Database on Sacred Natural Sites (<www.sanasi.org>), and Silene Documentation Center (<www.silene.es>).

⁴ On the journal website of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) (<www.periodicos.capes.gov.br>) and on Scientific Electronic Library Online (<www.scielo.br>).

descriptors⁵. Reference to natural features of the Brazilian territory – to which symbolic, religious and/or spiritual meanings were attributed – was a criterion for the inclusion of search results in this research.

The preliminary results of this study were summarized in a paper entitled *Sítios Naturais Sagrados no Brasil: o gigante desconhecido* (Fernandes-Pinto & Irving, 2015a), which was presented at the VIIth Brazilian Seminar on Protected Areas and Social Inclusion – SAPIS⁶. This pioneering compilation of data on the theme, besides listing 60 SNS in Brazil, identified a series of limitations in researches with regards to this topic in the usual bibliographical search mechanisms of scientific databases. This study showed that references to SNS were mostly dispersed throughout studies of several branches of knowledge and that the lack of standardization of descriptors and keywords⁷ made it difficult to identify, select and sort those references. As a result, the discovery of a significant part of the compiled data required not only a sorting process based on the titles and abstracts of the publications but chiefly a search through the text of the documents – an effort as strenuous as a data mining process.

In view of these difficulties, to foster the discovery of SNS within the Brazilian territory, a collaborative research strategy entitled *Rede SNS Brasil* was created. Launched at the aforementioned event (VIIth SAPIS), this initiative was conceived with the intention of giving visibility to the theme of SNS in Brazil. Furthermore, it aimed at expanding knowledge of national sacred sites by adding contributions from researchers from several areas of study, public officials and representatives of social or spiritual movements, as well as by sharing this knowledge with the aid of social media networks⁸.

The combination of these strategies allowed for a diversification of sources of information on the subject – including search results on more general search websites such as Google, library collections, research group pages, academic social networks (Research Gate and Academia.edu), and direct contact with specialists –, resulting in the compilation of about 400 references and the listing of more than 480 SNS within the Brazilian territory⁹.

As it would not be possible to describe all of the sites within the scope of one article, we tried to illustrate the variety of typologies, meanings and

⁵ The word *sítio* (site), for example, was combined with *lugar*, *local*, *área*, *caverna*, *montanha*, and *santuário* (place, location, area, cave, mountain, and sanctuary, respectively); the word *natural* (natural) was combined with *natureza* and *ambiente* (nature and environment, respectively), and the word *sagrado* (sacred) was combined with *místico*, *misterioso*, *mágico*, *curativo*, *religioso*, *milagroso*, *santo*, *esotérico*, and *encantado* (mystic, mysterious, magical, healing, religious, miraculous, saint, esoteric, and enchanted, respectively) – including plural and feminine variations.

⁶ This event was held in November 2015 in Florianópolis (state of Santa Catarina, Brazil).

⁷ On the one hand, descriptors are base terms that convey key concepts of a knowledge domain and are defined by search engine indexes. On the other, keywords are terms that represent the subject matter of the document and are proposed by the authors. These aspects are the basis of the indexing process, allowing to identify and select journals based on the description of their thematic content (UFPR, 2007).

⁸ Mainly Facebook (<www.facebook.com/sitiosnaturaisagradados/>) and Pinterest (<br.pinterest.com/snsbrasil/>). To take part in this network, send request to <snsbrasil@gmail.com>.

⁹ These results include material processed until July 2017.

uses of these spaces based on emblematic examples, highlighting some fundamental elements for the comprehension of this phenomenon in Brazilian territory¹⁰. However, before entering this universe, it is important to note some considerations concerning the conceptual background on the theme and the criteria adopted to consider, or not, a particular place as a SNS, as explained below.

3. On the (in)definition of sacred natural sites

Attributing symbolic or spiritual meaning to particular locations in nature is reportedly a characteristic common to various human groups throughout history, an ancestral practice common all over the world and is still present in many regions in contemporary times. As discussed earlier, such locations have been reported in the specialized literature as sacred natural sites (SNS) – an expression adopted by several authors that is becoming more and more consolidated in the global debate on public policies, encompassing a very diverse set of possibilities. However, this term first appeared only in the early 2000s¹¹ and did not necessarily represent the beginning of studies of such a broad and complex subject.

Even though the authorship of the term SNS is not very clear¹², it has gained visibility on the global scene through the research of the Specialist Group for Cultural and Spiritual Values of

Protected Areas (CSVPA), related to IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA). Another important milestone was the publication of a document with guidelines for good practices entitled *Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers* (Wild & McLeod, 2008) in a partnership between UNESCO and IUCN, which became one of the primary references on the subject.

Considering that everything depends on what is meant by the words being used, it is noteworthy that the three words that form the expression – sacred, natural and sites – may have different meanings depending on the context in which they are used, resulting in different nuances in their interpretation. As previously mentioned, SNS may be related to a wide variety of morphological features – from a single stone or tree to forest formations or entire mountain ranges –, thus delimiting a site as a specific element is not always possible. Moreover, the fact that places of religious significance are often consecrated with human artifacts also makes their distinction as natural problematic. However, the inclusion of this term in the initial terminology “sacred sites” was justified by some authors as a strategy to differentiate, for example, a cathedral from a cave (Thorley & Gunn, 2007).

Nevertheless, the conceptual difficulties with regards to the terms “site” and “natural” cannot be compared to the multiplicity of perspectives and theoretical complexity that accompany the word

¹⁰ The complete list of SNS featured in this study and references are included in the Doctoral Thesis of Fernandes-Pinto (2017), available at: <<https://goo.gl/ZNCE11>>.

¹¹ The Vth World Parks Congress, held by IUCN in Durban (South Africa) in 2003, is considered the starting point of the international debate on the theme, especially regarding recognition of the cultural and spiritual values of the protected areas. However, the first resolution specifically related to sacred natural sites was only approved at the World Conservation Congress of Barcelona (Spain) in 2008.

¹² The coinage of this term in the specialized literature is often attributed to Thomas Schaaf, a researcher linked to UNESCO's Man and the

“sacred”. This word often does not have a direct equivalent in the native languages of societies that do not recognize the separation between nature and culture, between material and immaterial, or between sacred and profane. Faced with these issues, Carmichael *et al.* (1994) proposed the use of this term as a keyword that encompasses the multiple meanings attributed to SNS by cultural groups themselves, rather than seeking one single definition for it. Schaaf (2003) shared the same vision as he proposed the use of sacred in a generic and not necessarily religious sense.

Eliade (2010) was an influential historian of religion and the author of *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (originally published in 1957), a reference in this field. For this author, the notion of sacred implies being faced with something different, coming from a reality that is separated from that of ordinary perception – a fact that nonetheless manifests itself in the physical world, constituting hierophanies. This idea refers to something that exists *a priori*, even before experience takes place, i.e., to something that is only recognized by culture and not created by it. Thus, sacred distinguishes itself from the notion of the divine – atheistic idea that seeks to describe divinity in rational terms, based on human attributes such as love, goodness and faith. The experience of the sacred surpasses the domain of the intellectual and is not therefore explicable, only experientially.

Over and above the academic debate, the wealth of vernacular and native terms used to refer

to SNS is possibly as large as the multiplicity of social groups that recognize these sites (Thorley & Gunn, 2007). In general, this can be considered as an etic concept – employed by external agents to refer to certain elements of the cultures being researched – whereas names given locally to these places can be considered as emic concepts – created by social groups based on their cultural categories (Marques, 2001).

Considering the variety of situations represented by SNS, there are also numerous difficulties in formulating a definition that adequately expresses this concept. This difficulty could be the main reason for an apparent lack of academic formulations concerning this expression, as some authors point out (Thorley & Gunn, 2007). Publications on the subject are mostly based on generic and operational definitions, or even on common sense, without leaning on more elaborate theoretical constructions, leaving the identification of parameters on these concepts to the very groups related to them. Thus, it can be noted that the expression SNS, aside from being just a concept, has been used in the specialized literature and in international debates as a label to characterize a diversified spectrum of possibilities as objects of study and application of public policies.

In the context of this study, as previously mentioned, we adopted the concept of SNS as featured in the official documents from UNESCO and IUCN (Wild & McLeod, 2008). Therefore, places considered to be SNS in Brazil were the ones related to a variety of social groups, religious

Biosphere Programme that coordinated pioneering projects on the subject. However, the first international publications to contain the term in its title, as far as it was possible to research, are a workshop held in Paris in 1998 (UNESCO, 1998) and the concept paper of the international initiative for the protection of SNS implemented by the World Wide Fund for Nature (Jeanrenaud, 2001).

traditions, and spiritualist groups (institutionalized or not), regardless of whether they were related to any form of formal recognition or not. Sites considered to be strictly natural (with no direct anthropic interferences) and sites featuring human-made structures – as long as they were installed for worshipping purposes – were both included, as the examples presented below aim to further specify.

4. Sacred natural sites in Brazil: unveiling the undiscovered giant

SNS in Brazil features a wide range of typologies related to natural elements and include at least 122 caves, 104 hills, 99 water bodies, 50 rock formations, 30 forests and/or tree species, 30 coastal-marine formations, 30 pilgrim paths, and other 21 places or regions. These sites are distributed across all states of the Federation – in rural and urban areas alike – and are associated with multiple religious practices and cultural manifestations. Some sites are well established and nationally famous and attract visitors from various parts of Brazil and the rest of the world, whereas others are only known locally. There are also sites that are shrouded in mystery, whose location and/

or religious purpose is a secret only known by a restricted number of individuals.

The references analyzed include sacred sites recognized by a variety of social groups, such as indigenous peoples (related to 82 sites) and other traditional populations, including *quilombolas*¹³, rubber tappers, *ribeirinhos*¹⁴, *babaçu*¹⁵ -coconut breakers, artisanal fishermen, *sertanejos*¹⁶, among others (related to 67 sites), as well as religious/spiritualist traditions. Amongst the most relevant traditions, are: Catholicism – the dominant religion in Brazil, adopted by 64% of its population –, with 234 sites; alternative religions¹⁷, with 84 sites; Afro-Brazilian¹⁸ traditions, with 68 sites; neo-Pentecostalism¹⁹, with 21 sites, and Eastern philosophies – Buddhism, in particular, which is considered to be the most important minority religion in Brazil (Neri, 2011) –, with four sites.

Some SNS are related to archaeological sites with vestiges of ceremonial use by prehistoric peoples and megalithic monuments – sets of ancient and enigmatic rock formations (22 sites). It is also worth noting that about 15% of the SNS listed in this study were associated with more than one religious tradition or social group and could be considered as multireligious.

¹³ Descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves that live in communities called *Quilombos*, founded by their ancestors as they escaped from slave plantations during the era of slavery in Brazil.

¹⁴ Populations that live in riparian areas.

¹⁵ *Attalea spp.* (Arecaceae). Typical palm tree native of the Central Region of Brazil.

¹⁶ Natives from the semi-arid region known as *Sertão*, in Northeastern Brazil.

¹⁷ An emerging movement in Brazil that is represented by several groups, whose practitioners have distinct experiences from those of conventional Western religious traditions, also called New Age philosophies (Siqueira, 2010).

¹⁸ They include a variety of traditions such as *Candomblé* (originated in Africa), *Umbanda* (created in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, at the beginning of the 20th century), and regional derivations such as *Terecô* and *Tambor de Mina* (state of Maranhão, Brazil).

¹⁹ A recent and dynamic strand of evangelicalism, which emerged in Brazil in the 1970s. This religion has grown the most in the country in the last two decades, being practiced by about 22% of its population (Neri, 2011).

The origins and reasons for the sacredness of these sites are diverse, varying according to their natural characteristics and to the beliefs of the groups that consecrate them. Narratives regarding SNS involve origin myths of indigenous peoples, connections to deities or ancestral spirits, references to significant moments in the history of a social group, and/or remarkable events from the life of personalities venerated by the common folk. There are also SNS related to astronomical alignments and manifestations of extraordinary natural phenomena, to places that originate special resources such as sacred waters and plants of power, and even to accounts of the existence of interdimensional portals, entrances to the intraterrestrial world, the presence of secret civilizations, and UFO evidence. Sacred sites are also commonly associated with legends about mythological beings – such as mermaids and dragons – that both enchant and frighten the popular imagination.

Several practices associated with the sacredness of SNS take place, both occasionally and recurrently, within their physical limits – from individual prayers, meditation and contemplation to collective celebrations such as gatherings, masses, baptisms, pilgrimages, and religious festivities. Due to these manifestations, some SNS became important regional tourist destinations (Travassos *et al.*, 2011).

In the context of Catholicism, nature commonly represents a backdrop for the celebration of its religious rites. Several natural sites are consecrated with physical landmarks – from small altars, crosses, and sacred images to large statues, chapels, churches, and cathedrals. Some dates mark the celebration of special events that bring together thousands of people, such as Holy Week

(a representation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ).

The religious complex *Grutas do Bom Jesus da Lapa* (state of Bahia, Brazil) – one of the largest underground sanctuaries in the world – stands out among the SNS related to Catholicism in Brazil. Its most important celebration, which has taken place in August in the same place for more than 300 years, brings together about 600,000 people, in an event that is probably the oldest and largest religious festival related to a cave in Brazil (Steil, 1996; Magalhães, 2010). There are also dozens of other natural caves within the Brazilian territory consecrated with Catholic rites, such as the *Gruta das Mangabeiras* (state of Bahia, Brazil) and the *Lapa de Terra Ronca* (state of Goiás, Brazil). However, accounts on the use of these environments by other religious traditions are scarce.

In addition, there are also several hills in Brazil where sanctuaries were built, such as the *Nossa Senhora da Piedade*, in Serra da Piedade (state of Minas Gerais, Brazil); the *Nossa Senhora das Vitóriaas*, in Monte do Galo (state of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil); and the *Nossa Senhora Imaculada Rainha do Sertão*, in Morro do Urucum (state of Ceará, Brazil). Statues of holy figures were installed on other hills, such as the statue of Padre Cícero Romão Batista (a Catholic priest of great popular reverence in Northeast Brazil), in Serra do Catolé (state of Ceará, Brazil); the statue of Frei Damião (an Italian monk from the Capuchin Order, settled in Brazil in the 1930s), in Alto do Cruzeiro (state of Pernambuco, Brazil); and the statue of Santa Rita de Cassia (an Augustinian nun and godmother of the *sertões*), in Monte Carmelo (state of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil). The most famous statue is the Christ the Redeemer, on the

Corcovado mountain (state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), which constitutes an expressive national symbol and one of the main tourist attractions in the country (Moutinho-da-Costa, 2008).

A relatively recent but significant phenomenon in Brazil is the so-called *montes de oração* (praying hills). These hills are related to neo-Pentecostal religions – which have been expanding in the country, especially in large urban centers such as the city of Rio de Janeiro. For these traditions, according to biblical precepts, the act of climbing certain hills connotes a form of physical sacrifice in search of spiritual purification and ascension (Maciel & Gonçalves, 2015).

Many natural hills used for religious purposes are havens of preserved nature, which have been able to remain untouched principally due to their rugged relief. This feature hinders the expansion of agriculture and the advancement of other economic activities. But the fact that their symbolic importance has also contributed to their preservation should not be disregarded. However, this line of research is still rare in studies conducted in Brazil (Brito, 2008).

There are many instances of water sources that are believed to have miraculous powers within the Brazilian territory. In a broad review on the topic, Lazzarini & Bonotto (2014) mapped 102 locations in Brazil with hydric outcrops related to mythical aspects, magical powers or healing, energetic and rejuvenating properties. In the Southern region of the country²⁰, for example, sources

of water that are said to have been blessed by the monk João Maria de Agostini (an Italian priest who pilgrimaged across Brazil between 1844 and 1852) are still present in the collective imagination. They are revered not only by followers of Catholicism but also by the indigenous peoples *Guarani* and *Kaingang* (Karsburg, 2012).

Furthermore, the holding of terrestrial, fluvial, lacustrine, and maritime processions is also a customary practice in several places (Amado, 2011). In addition, several sacred pathways are found in the country, such as the ones in Luz (state of Minas Gerais, Brazil), in Sol (state of São Paulo, Brazil), in Fé (state of São Paulo, Brazil), in Missões (state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil), and in Passos de Anchieta (state of Espírito Santo, Brazil). In general, these pathways originated from ancient routes of religious pilgrimage, but people have been classifying them as tourist destinations since 2000, inspired by the world's famous Way of Saint James²¹, incorporating elements of the New Age spirituality (Steil & Carneiro, 2008). The *Caminho do Peabiru* – a transcontinental route of about 4,000 kilometers used by native peoples before the period of colonization – has also been gaining touristic relevance in recent years (Bond, 2009).

Considering the wide-ranging and eclectic universe of alternative religiosities in Brazil, many of these lines articulate elements from various classic spiritual traditions, relating them to the valuing of an ecumenical spirituality characterized by

²⁰ In the states of Paraná and Santa Catarina (Brazil), place of the *Contestado* War (1912-1916), one of the largest popular uprisings in the history of Brazil.

²¹ It is noteworthy that Brazil is the non-European country that sends the most pilgrims to Santiago. There are societies of friends of this path in several Brazilian states, and many of the national routes seem to have come to firstly exist as training opportunities to cross the European path.

direct processes of personal transformation, which meet their fullest expression by interacting with nature (Carvalho & Steil, 2008). In this context, SNS are often considered as planetary chakras or vortexes that irradiate energy (Lima, 2005). These traditions, in general, understand the Earth as a living organism²², endowed with a circulation grid that connects points of high concentration of energy – the so-called ley lines (Thorley & Gunn, 2007). For these groups, the activation of SNS aims at awakening a new ecological awareness, related to the restoration of the vital unity between society and nature (Amaral, 2000).

The *Chapada dos Veadeiros*, in the Brazilian Central Plateau (state of Goiás, Brazil), is one of the icons of this movement, attracting national and international groups (Siqueira & Bandeira, 1998). In the *Serra da Mantiqueira* (state of Minas Gerais, Brazil), there is a touristic circuit of magical mountains certified by the State (Tavares *et al.*, 2011). The *Morro do Japão* (state of Mato Grosso, Brazil) is considered to be the only Buddhist sacred mountain in the Americas. The mountains of Rio de Janeiro – filled with legends and myths of indigenous ancestors – have been rediscovered by the spiritualist movement in contemporary times. As a result, they have become the stage for several manifestations. Due to its forms that entice the curiosity of tourists and scholars, the *Pedra da Gávea*, in particular, is surrounded by mysteries that connect it to ancient civilizations and extraterrestrial beings (Malta, 2016).

In the *Serra do Roncador* (state of Mato Grosso, Brazil), the plan for public use of a state park included the construction of a space-port (a type of “airport for spaceships”). This construction was built not only due to the demands from various groups of ufological studies in the region but also because the local government envisioned a potential tourist attraction. The forests in *Alto Rio Purus* (Upper River Purus) surround the *Céu do Mapiá* (state of Acre, Brazil), origin of the doctrine of *Santo Daime* – a religion that was originated in the forest, uses plants of power or entheogens²³ endowed with a circulation grid that connects points of high concentration of energy – the so-called ley lines (Thorley & Gunn, 2007). For these groups, the activation of SNS aims at awakening a new ecological awareness, related to the restoration of the vital unity between society and nature (Amaral, 2000).

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²² This perspective, which relates to the Gaia Theory proposed by James Lovelock in 1972, has been brought back in contemporary times even in the formulation of public policies, as in the Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, a proposal presented to the United Nations in 2010.

²³ The term “entheogen” means manifestation of the divine within and has been used to refer to the natural substances that induce states of trance, used as a means of contact with the spiritual world and divine beings (Labate & Goulart, 2005).

for several manifestations. Due to its forms that entice the curiosity of tourists and scholars, the *Pedra da Gávea*, in particular, is surrounded by mysteries that connect it to ancient civilizations and extraterrestrial beings (Malta, 2016).

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In the Northeastern outback, the *Serra Negra* (state of Pernambuco, Brazil) is an ancestor site where the secret ritual of *Ouricuri* is held for the *Kambiwá* and *Pipipã* peoples (Léo Neto, 2015), as well as the *Serra do Arapué* (state of Pernambuco, Brazil), for the *Pankará* people (Oliveira, 2014), and the *Serra do Umã* (state of Pernambuco, Brazil), for the *Atikum* people (Silva, 2007). In

the coastal region of Southern Bahia, the Monte Pascoal is considered to be the first section of Brazilian territory to be sighted by the Portuguese fleet commanded by Pedro Álvares Cabral and therefore considered a symbol of the “discovery” of Brazil. However, this representation has been challenged by the *Pataxó*, who demand the recognition of indigenous ancestry of this area, which was transformed into a national park (Valle, 2001).

In contrast to SNS recognized by institutionalized religions – common structural interventions to facilitate the access and circulation of members – places revered by traditional peoples tend to be kept with no occupation and/or direct human interventions. Some sites can only be visited under special conditions or by individuals that undergo some initiation rites²⁵. Besides, there are places reserved solely for beings from the spiritual realm and must not be accessed by humans, with the risk of severe consequences in case of transgressions (Marques, 1999). It is also reported that impeding the access of traditional guardians to these areas may also bring losses to the sacred places, since the spiritual forces may perish if the rituals and offerings are not supplied to them (Ferretti, 2008).

Several places in Brazil are also recognized as the home of legendary princesses – such as the *Praia of Jericoacoara* (state of Ceará, Brazil) –, kings – such as the dunes of the *Ilha dos Lençóis* (state of Maranhão, Brazil) –, mermaids – such as the *Gruta das Encantadas* (state of Paraná, Brazil)-, among other mythical beings. In the marshland region of the state of Mato Grosso, Leite

²⁴ This memorial is a reference to the literary work of Arthur Conan Doyle – *The Lost World*, 1912 –, inspired by the stories of the first European explorers to access this region and it marks the popular imagination in contemporary times.

²⁵ It is considered the conception of the term assigned by Eliade (2010): ceremonies and trials that test the individual and mark his/her entrance into the dimension of the sacred.

(2000, p. 3) it is said that the enchanted beings²⁶ are part of the “life, fears, episodes, memory, landscapes, and culture of the region.” Leite’s studies show that submerged and supernatural worlds are intermingled with the natural world in the imagination of the marshland population. However, in this author’s perspective, there is little research with regards to the region considering the cultural relations between the local communities and the environment in which they are inserted – a scenario that seems to also occur in other regions of the country.

There is still a lack of initiatives to map and register SNS in Brazil. The Mapeo Project of Cultural Mapping – a partnership between Brazil and Colombia, started in 2009 – has identified various components of the landscape that form the central elements of the cosmological systems of indigenous peoples from Northwestern Amazon (Scolfaro *et al.*, 2014). The Anaconda Project – carried out by the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Rio Negro (FOIRN) in partnership with the Social-Environmental Institute (ISA), based on a broad participatory process – reported more than 300 sacred places²⁷ related to the mythical narratives of peoples from that region (Andrello, 2012).

Studies on mapping experiences on SNS of indigenous peoples reinforce the need to promote the exchange of knowledge between generations, fostering reflections on the history of peoples and their transformations, and therefore combining the documentation of SNS to the appraisal of their ritualistic practices. They also indicate a great

interest from the groups to maintain this type of project and expand this initiative to other areas. Besides, these studies show that these experiences not only contribute to their cultural appraisal but also support the processes of collective mobilization to guarantee their social and territorial rights.

Despite the lack of records on indigenous SNS, many of the news disseminated in the media features threats to these locations, particularly when the licensing of enterprises linked to infrastructure megaprojects are involved (Ricardo & Ricardo, 2006; 2011). An emblematic case was the construction of the Hydroelectric Complex of Belo Monte (state of Pará, Brazil), which was contested due to the impact on SNS that have high cultural value for the ethnic groups of that region, among other reasons.

Moreover, records on SNS have suffered acts of vandalism, and places have been subject to depredation motivated by religious intolerance, especially against groups of Afro-Brazilian origin. The literature on this topic also reports conflicts of interests concerning the use of these spaces – for instance, individuals or groups that visit these areas for leisure or practice of sports (Brito, 2008; Malta, 2016). These situations have led some social groups to demand from public authorities some strategic actions to safeguard their SNS – such as listing these areas as cultural heritage or creating municipal parks that acknowledge these values. In other contexts, social groups themselves seek to acquire areas embedded with symbolic meanings to ensure spaces that can be used for their rituals (Malta, 2016).

²⁶ Magical beings conceived as spirits of men and women who have gone directly from this world to a mythical realm are referred to as “the ones who became enchanted” (Prandi, 2004).

²⁷ However, they are not addressed in this article due to the impossibility to specify them.

The National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN) listed some catholic monuments in natural areas due to the cultural value of their architecture, history or landscape – such as the Christ the Redeemer (state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), the *Santuário da Serra da Piedade* (state of Minas Gerais, Brazil), and the *Toca do Boqueirão* (state of Piauí, Brazil). Even though the listing process is commonly used as an instrument to safeguard cultural goods of material value – many times, of immaterial and intangible value as well –, it is still little applied in public policies in Brazil.

In Brazil, the listing process of cultural goods of immaterial value was only established in 2000 (by Federal Decree N°. 3551), including offices and procedures, forms of expression, and places where certain practices congregate and occur. The aforementioned *Cachoeiras do Iauaretê* (state of Amazonas, Brazil) constitute the first safeguarding process of intangible heritage regarding SNS in the country, being effectuated in 2006 (IPHAN, 2008)²⁸. It also represents a pioneering patrimonialization case of the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples. This case shows that the application of this policy has been expanding to social groups that had been historically neglected in the agenda of preservation actions (Jaenisch, 2011).

Nevertheless, these initiatives are sporadic and incipient considering the potential of the Brazilian territory regarding the occurrence of sacred sites. In addition, based on the threats that many of these places are subject to, it is necessary to move forward with the proposition of complementary strategies that aim at protecting SNS in Brazil.

It is noteworthy that, even though the relevance of SNS for natural preservation is commonly evinced in the literature, some issues that threaten these sites are the result of restrictions imposed by environmental legislation. Both the installation of sacred symbols – such as crosses and statues on hills – and the access to these places – a traditional habit in Catholic countries – have been restricted by legal regulations that protect the top of these elevations in the last decades (Brito, 2008). Visitations in caves are subjected to authorization by environmental agencies and require, in theory, the development of a management plan – including religious use. In other locations, offerings and objects of a religious nature left in nature are the target of coercive control actions of the State against religious groups (Malta, 2016).

Moreover, this study indicates that many SNS are associated with protected areas that were legally instituted by the public power. Some examples are: the *Morro do Corcovado* (state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), the *Monte Roraima* (state of Roraima, Brazil), and the *Cataratas do Iguaçu* (state of Paraná, Brazil), situated in national parks; the *Gruta Pedra da Santa* (state of Paraíba, Brazil), the *Morro do Anhangava* (state of Paraná, Brazil), and the *Caverna de Terra Ronca* (state of Goiás, Brazil), in state parks; the *Serra da Piedade* (state of Minas Gerais, Brazil), a state natural monument; among others. These records confirm the scenario described in the international literature by informing the global tendency to include SNS in the limits of protected areas in the last few decades,

²⁸ In 2010, two other sacred places – related to the *Kuarup*, a funeral ceremony ritual shared by the indigenous peoples of Alto Xingu (state of Mato Grosso) – were listed as cultural heritage of Brazil (Source: Portal do IPHAN).

often without their cultural and spiritual values being recognized (Dudley *et al.*, 2005; Wild & McLeod, 2008). In this context, it is noteworthy to emphasize that Brazil is the country with the largest number of protected areas in the world. However, the relationship between social groups and official bodies that are responsible for the management of the areas has also been permeated by conflicts related to the rights of access to and use of these territories (Lauriola, 2004; Mungai, 2008; Léo Neto, 2015; Sandroni & Carneiro, 2016).

These examples illustrate not only the variety and recurrence of SNS in the country but also their importance in the traditions of various social groups and religiosities. The different geographical and socio-economic contexts in which SNS are inserted, and the multiplicity of practices carried out in these spaces may result in different implications – both positive and negative – for nature preservation. However, there are numerous gaps in the available data regarding these areas, which results in challenges to the implementation of public policies for their management and protection.

5. Between scientific and popular knowledge: building an object of study

Most of the specialized literature produced on this theme has been written in English, with a few translations into Spanish and French. Publications on this theme in Portuguese are scarce and the expression “sacred natural sites” is not common in the country yet. According to this study, the first Brazilian references to use this term are relatively recent and mostly concentrated in the last five years.

As far as it was possible to search, Moutinho-da-Costa’s master’s thesis (2008) was the first reference to use the expression “sacred natural sites” within the national bibliography. Other noteworthy points are the articles published in the annals of academic events by Corrêa *et al.* (2013) and Fernandes-Pinto & Irving (2015a) – the first one to mention the term in the title –, and articles published in scientific journals by Lazzarini & Bonotto (2014) and Fernandez-Pinto & Irving (2017).

However, the adoption of this expression does not delimit the studies on the theme in the country, since they have been historically approached by various academic fields. Some terms with similar meanings that are used in Brazilian publications are sacred place, geo-symbol, and sites of belonging. These notions are embedded especially in Cultural Geography. In addition to this discipline, the analysis of the literature indicates that SNS have been studied in Brazil mainly through qualitative researches in Humanities and Social Sciences, such as History, Anthropology, Sociology, Theology, and Social Psychology.

This research focuses mainly on the description and interpretation of historic-cultural processes through which the sites have been made sacred and transformed into places of religious manifestations. Another important approach to evince is investigating the relationship between sacred places and touristic activity, particularly in the segment called religious tourism (Oliveira, 2011). The interface with the preservation of cultural heritage is also a recurring theme, notably in the field of the Geography of Religions, including studies on the diffusion and distribution of traditions, delimitation of sacred space and influence of religiosity on humans’ displacement (Rosendahl,

1996; Corrêa & Rosendahl, 2004). The academic production that aims to reflect on the religious use of geological and palaeontological heritage has also been expanding in recent years (Delphim, 2009), mainly concerning the relevant national production about caves, their symbolism and religious uses (Travassos *et al.*, 2011).

Despite the evidence on the existence of this interface, these reflections are still scarce within the research developed in Brazilian territory. The references listed emphasize, in general, the negative impacts of religious practices on nature and the conflicts involving protected areas (Brito, 2005; Cavalcante, 2007; Campos *et al.*, 2008), rarely mentioning the potential and benefits that the acknowledgment of these values can offer.

Overall, the results of the literature analysis indicate a predominance of references to SNS connected to Catholicism and a lower incidence of records related to other religiosities. It is noteworthy to mention that, despite the decline in the number of practitioners in recent decades and the occurrence of other diverse religiosities in the country, Brazil is still predominantly Catholic²⁹, and this hegemony is observed in various spheres of society, including academic research.

For this reason, authors who investigate the cultural importance of certain elements of nature (such as caves) have questioned whether the use of these spaces by non-Catholic traditions is really less common or just less documented in research, due to the existent prejudice in the country towards some of these religiosities (Guimarães *et al.*, 2011). Studies of Catholicism are also quite prominent in

the Geography of Religions, and for this reason, some authors reinforce the need to broaden the research to other religious groups (Arantes, 2014; Malta, 2016). In particular, the contemporaneous movements of alternative religiosities represent a niche that is still scarcely explored in the academic studies on this theme, which is also a reality in international literature.

These observations also apply to indigenous peoples and other traditional populations, whose records on SNS in Brazil may be underestimated, especially considering that the pioneer mapping experiments in this field testify to the relevance of these sites in both their cosmologies and conformation of their territories (Andrello, 2012; Scolfaro *et al.*, 2014).

It is important to consider that one of the most striking characteristics of SNS concerns the subjective relationship that certain social groups have with these places – which should not be interpreted solely as physical sites since they combine the knowledge and duties of their guardians. These guardians may even live at a considerable distance from the sites while remaining connected to them by means of stories passed through generations and their spiritual practices – a situation that seems to be common in the Brazilian context. Furthermore, SNS do not represent static elements in time and space and are subject to internal and external dynamic processes, which include possibilities of destruction, abandonment, and neglect on the one hand, and revitalization and re-signification on the other.

²⁹ According to the last national demographic data, about 68% of the population declared to be connected to Catholicism. Brazil has the largest contingent of Catholics in the world. This was the official religion of the State until the promulgation of the Republican Constitution of 1891, which adopted the secular State (Neri, 2011).

Another relevant point to be observed from this study is that most of the information compiled regarding SNS in Brazil came from sources that are unconventional to the classic academic research and thus are not found by consulting databases of scientific publications. Indeed, only 17% of the references listed correspond to articles published in journals. Most of the records are news from newspapers, magazines, and internet websites (20%); books and book chapters (19%); doctorate, master and undergraduate theses (18%); annals of technical-scientific events (12%); publications of governmental bureaus, non-governmental organizations, electronic newsletters of scientific societies or scientific journals (7%), and other media (7%). This type of material – that is not indexed in scientific databases – has been called grey literature, a concept whose international consolidation began in the 1970s, especially in Europe and in the United States, but is still little explored in Brazil.

This framework deserves further reflection in the context of this study since grey literature has been recognized as an essential source of knowledge on highly relevant issues for science, despite the various concerns regarding the standard of quality, the credibility of data, and the scientific merit of these documents. The ease of access and the circulation of information – particularly considering the growth of digital collections – are the positive aspects of using this type of material in the construction of new knowledge³⁰. Moreover, due to the high quality standard commonly required for articles in journals³¹, in addition to the time to

analyze the submissions until the real publication (up to two years) and the fact that many platforms are not free, the results of various relevant studies for the construction of a field of knowledge may not be available in traditional journals. This scenario makes grey literature a valuable source of often unpublished information, as observed in the study conducted on SNS in Brazil. Besides, more detailed descriptions of phenomena studied are commonly found in grey literature – especially in theses and dissertations – than in scientific articles, in which the number of pages is limited due to their size (Auger, 1989; Población, 1992; Gomes *et al.*, 2000).

These factors partly explain the lack of information with regards to Brazilian SNS in international databases on the subject, as foreign authors do not always have access to grey literature – produced almost exclusively in Portuguese. However, another aspect that favors this situation is the fact that the international literature specialized in this theme – as well as the recommendations and guidelines proposed in global events of reference in the last decades – is practically not mentioned in Brazilian publications. This situation represents an essential gap in the research on this theme conducted in the country, revealing a disconnection with the broader international discussion and a lack of participation in the global debate on public policies. Nevertheless, these aspects do not seem to be the only aspects involved in the issue, since this gap of information is also seen in international

³⁰ However, in online-exclusive publications, the long-term access of documents may not be maintained indefinitely – an issue referred to as link rot by some authors.

³¹ Understood as those that cover one or more disciplines, are regularly edited, have an editorial board, and whose articles are accredited by expert proofreaders, based on criteria for the assessment of the structure and quality of the text (UFPR, 2007).

publications for the majority of Latin-American countries.

Whether due to the difficulty of idiomatic translation or to the incipient participation of Brazilian researchers in global forums³², these factors also contribute to the worldwide invisibility of Brazilian SNS³³. Considering this situation, the adoption of the expression “sacred natural sites” in this article – although not usually in Brazilian publications and problematic from a theoretical/conceptual point of view – is justified by the intention of promoting the connection of the research carried out in the country with the ongoing worldwide debate³⁴. It is also noteworthy to consider that this term allows a comprehensive conceptualization, applicable to spiritual values of nature expressed by different social groups, beyond the majority religions – which is great importance given the religious and cultural diversity in the Brazilian context.

Under the paradigm of modernity, the duality view between culture and nature has resulted in a fragmented view of reality both in academic research and in the formulation of public policies. Thus, at the core of this reflection, is the need for advances in recognition of the interdependence of these dimensions. When studying SNS, it is essential to seek understanding of this phenomenon from an integrated perspective of nature, social groups, their knowledge and their practices, as inseparable elements of a unique equation. It is a complex

theme that requires research based on interdisciplinary perspectives and theoretical approaches capable not only of promoting the dialogue between scientific knowledge and popular wisdom but also of deconstructing these dichotomies.

6. Final considerations: new horizons to be unveiled

As discussed in this article, Brazilian SNS include a wide variety of morphological features present both on land and in inland waters and coastal-marine areas. The results show that the recurrence of the manifestation of this phenomenon in different regions of the country and its importance for many social groups contrast with its incipient recognition in public policies. In addition, bibliographic references on the subject are mostly scattered in non-indexed publications, permeating a wide range of studies from multiple areas of knowledge, often disconnected from the international debate.

The strategy of the *Rede SNS Brasil* was essential to expand the records and deepen the reflection on the subject, allowing access to diverse sources of information on the theme and the mobilization of a network of interlocutors to disseminate investigations carried out in this regard in Brazil. This initiative, although embryonic, indicates the potential of collaborative research in the construction of new knowledge – a methodolo-

³² As evidenced when there is indeed the participation in some of them, notably in the last IUCN worldwide congresses.

³³ More detailed approach on this subject is necessary and may indicate patterns of coloniality of knowledge and imbalances between the epistemologies of the North and the South, including among groups and organizations that seek to break with these assumptions.

³⁴ First effort in this direction was made with the presentation of the paper entitled *Sacred Natural Sites in Brazil: a collaborative research*, at the IUCN World Conservation Congress, held in September 2016 in Honolulu (Hawaii). Available at: <<https://portals.iucn.org/congress/session/10000>>.

gy that is still little used in conventional academic approaches, aligned with the premises of a citizen science³⁵.

However, it is noteworthy to consider that many references on the subject may still remain covert, not being detected by the methods used in this study. Considering the socio-environmental richness of Brazil, it is presumed that there is still much to be learned about this subject. This is particularly relevant in the case of SNS associated with indigenous peoples and other traditional populations – segments that represent the main gap in academic research on the subject.

For these reasons, the importance of the continuity of this inventory and the diversification of research strategies are acknowledged in order to include both the review of bibliographic material and the recording of primary information. In this second case, interviews with strategic interlocutors and field studies in areas of potential occurrence of SNS are some possible paths indicated in the literature specialized on the subject. In addition, structuring a virtual platform that allows direct registration of SNS by researchers and/or representatives of social groups is also a viable instrument to continue the collaborative research initiated with the *Rede SNS Brasil*.

However, in order to advance in the formulation of public policies and planning of concrete actions for the management and safeguarding of these areas, it is essential to progress in the construction of a broader and more articulated research action, allied to the intervention – research,

government agencies, civil society organizations, and social movements.

Therefore, the continuity of studies on SNS in Brazil should include a more detailed description of their socio-environmental characteristics, legal dominance status of the areas, their state of conservation, problems and threats, among others. In addition, it is noteworthy that the registration of primary data on SNS – as international standards dictate – must guarantee the traditional guardians' right to confidentiality regarding the location and function of their sites (if they so wish) and prior consent on any intervention that reflects on them.

Considering that many of these sites are in protected areas, it is essential to progress in recognizing and reflecting not only on the social importance of the phenomenon but also on its implications for nature protection strategies. Ensuring the role of traditional guardians in making decisions about the rules of use and management of these places has been one of the main themes of global discussions on the subject. However, we cannot deny that religious use in natural areas can lead to several negative impacts on their conservation and that these should not be disregarded.

Considering the apparent scarcity of information on Brazilian SNS in the literature specialized and the global debate on the subject, testing the applicability of international guidelines for the management of SNS and assessing their suitability for the national legal framework are necessary steps to promote this approach. Moreover, this gap will only be overcome by encouraging the publication

³⁵ Perspective that considers science as an instrument for citizenship, the citizen as a potential scientific agent and the results of research as public good. Source: <<http://www.movimentocienciacidadada.org/manifesto>>.

and translation of results from Brazilian studies into other languages, especially English, and by the participation of national representatives in forums and global events. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the information compiled on SNS in Brazil in this exploratory study possibly puts the country in a prominent position on a global level about this theme.

With no aim at exhausting the debate on such rich and instigating theme, this article seeks to raise awareness on the importance of SNS in the Brazilian scenario, outlining them as an object of scientific study and application of public policies. The research on SNS presents a significant potential in the country, revealing a mostly unknown facet of its patrimony, related to the configuration of national identity itself. Finally, we send an invitation to act and form alliances that contribute to the mission of unveiling the wonders and mysteries of nature's sacred dimensions in the *terra brasilis*.

The journey, after all, continues...

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