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Guardians of the Forest - Yucuna Indians

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[Guardians of the Forest - Yucuna indians, deep in the Colombian Amazon, dressed in their traditional suits for the Baile del Mueco, or Puppet Dance, in which they celebrate the abundance of the chonta](#)

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A[ilbert Lacombe] / Imprimerie Ch[arles] Pinot, à Epinal, *TABLEAU-CATÉCHISME  
COMPOSÉ PAR LE R. P. A. LACOMBE OBLAT DE M.I. MISSIONNAIRE DANS L'AMÉRIQUE  
DU NORD, ET EMPLOYÉ AVEC SUCCÈS POUR L'INSTRUCTION PROMPTE ET FACILE*

*DES SAUVAGES. [“Catechism Chart Composed by R[everend] F[ather] A[lbert] Lacombe, Missionary Oblate of M[ary] I[mmaculate] in North America, and Used with Success for the Prompt and Easy Instruction of Uncivilized Peoples.”] Paris: Chez les Pères Oblats de Marie Immaculée, et chez Ch[arles] Letaille, éditeur, 15, rue Garancière [and] Montreal: Chez les Pères Oblats, Eglise S. Pierre, et chez M. Valois, libraire, [1873/1874].*

Lithograph with hand color, segmented and mounted on linen, 69 ¼”h x 12 ¼”w at edges. Very light scattered foxing and soiling, but better than very good.

*An innovative and very rare “pictorial catechism” for use by [Catholic missionaries](#) to the [native American](#) peoples of the northern Plains, incorporating elements of the “Catholic Ladder” and “The Way of Good and Evil”.*

The image is an elaboration on the “Sahale Stick”, developed in 1839 by Father Francis Norbert Blanchet (1795-1883) while at Cowlitz (across the Columbia from Portland) on mission to the indigenous peoples of the Northwest. In its earliest form, this was a teaching aid drawn or carved on a stick:

“Starting from the bottom of the stick he would leave a space of some inches and then carve or paint 40 bars, setting off each set of 10 bars with a space, so that the 40 bars representing the 4000 years before Christ appeared as four distinct groups of 10 bars, each representing 1000 years. After the last bar he continued carving or painting a series of 33 dots in a vertical line, again separating the groups of 10 dots, so that he had 3 groups of 10 dots and one group of three dots. The dots represented the 33 years of Christ’s life on earth. Above the dots he made a cross. He carved above the cross a group of 10 bars and a group of 8 bars, which represented the year 1 A.D. to the year 1000 A.D. and the year 1000 A.D. to the year 800 A.D. Above these bars three groups of ten dots and one group of nine dots brought the Sahale stick [as the first ladder was called in the Chinook language] to the year 1839.” (Hanley, p. 39)

The Sahale Stick was thus a mnemonic tool: “The intention of the missionary was to associate in the mind of the Indian each point of the faith with a particular bar on the Sahale stick.” So, for example, the Creation would come to be associated with the very first bar at the base of the stick. Blanchet himself soon elaborated on this and developed the [“Catholic Ladder”](#), retaining the bars-and-dots framework but adding illustrative images at key points—a tiny map of the world next to Creation, crucifixes next to the 33 dots representing the life of Christ, and so on. Blanchet’s Ladder was originally copied in manuscript, but in 1842-43 a large number were lithographed in Quebec, primarily for use in mission work though a few were bound into the June 1843 number of *Notice sur les missions du Diocèse de Québec*.

A generation later Oblate missionary Albert Lacombe—more on whom below—further elaborated on the Ladder to produce the “Tableau Catéchisme” offered here, called by one commentator “a small masterpiece of pedagogy.” (Paul Breton, *The Big Chief of the Prairies*, p. 64, quoted in Hanley) Sent in 1865 to minister to the Blackfeet in southern Alberta, he became frustrated with the limited impact of his preaching on his audiences and began to incorporate visual aids, which eventually evolved into the “Tableau”.

At its center is Blanchet’s Catholic Ladder, the only obvious difference being the addition of dots at the top to bring it up to the present day (On this particular edition there are 102 dots, of which

74 are colored, indicating that the “Tableau” was printed in 1874, or perhaps 1873.) Lacombe’s innovation was to surround the Ladder with a riot of instructive imagery, beginning at the bottom with God overseeing the Creation and ending at the top with Christ receiving the righteous into Heaven. Flanking the ladder are the Way of Good (in yellow) and Way of Evil (in gray) on the left and right respectively, both heavily illustrated with vignettes exemplifying the virtues and vices, along with dozens of tiny figures working their way toward Heaven or Hell.

Reflecting the purpose of the “Tableau”, and the Catholic Ladder before it, the Way of Evil features numerous figures in native American dress, often armed with spears or bows. The great majority of these appear destined for Hell, but a select few are shown being guided toward salvation by figures in priestly garb.

### **Publication and census**

According to Hanley, Lacombe’s bilingual French-English edition of the “Tableau” was first printed in 1872, sponsored by the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal and bearing the imprint of Beauchemin. As of November 2024 OCLC records just two or three examples in institutional collections in Canada and the United States.

The edition offered here bears the imprints of the Oblate establishments in both Paris and Montreal, but was printed in Epinal, France by Charles Pinot in 1873 or 1874 (As discussed above, the dating is based on internal evidence. Further support for this dating is Lacombe’s trip to Europe in those years for an assembly of leaders of the Oblate Order.) Hanley claims that 16,000 were run off (p. 121), though I find this hard to believe given the apparent rarity of the image today. OCLC records just three examples of this edition, while for some reason Catalogue collectif de France records none at all. A Google search turns up [another example](#) at Marquette.

Beauchemin issued [another bilingual edition](#) of the “Tableau” in 1895, and other editions were printed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Albert Lacombe (1827-1916)**

Lacombe was born in Saint-Sulpice, Quebec in 1827. He was ordained in 1849 and in 1855 became a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, an order best known for its missions to the indigenous peoples of western Canada. With the exception of brief trips to Europe for Oblate assemblies, he spent the great majority of his 60+ year career on mission to the Blackfoot, Crow, Métis, and other Native American peoples of the Canadian prairies. The “Tableau Catéchisme” was just one of his many publications to support the mission work of the Oblates.

“His other contributions to apostolic pedagogy were an illustrated catechism in the Cree language and an illustrated catechism for instructing Indians. The Cree catechism was more detailed than Lacombe’s ladder and was meant to be used by those who were familiar with the rudiments of the Catholic faith. In 1874 Lacombe published a dictionary and grammar of the Cree language that was widely used by other Oblates. He prepared the manuscript of a French-Blackfoot dictionary and collaborated with Émile-Joseph Legal to compile a Blackfoot, Blood, and Peigan vocabulary. He also did new editions of Frederic Baraga’s Ojibwa grammar and dictionary, translated the New Testament and numerous hymns into Cree, and published instructions and sermons in that language.” (*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*)

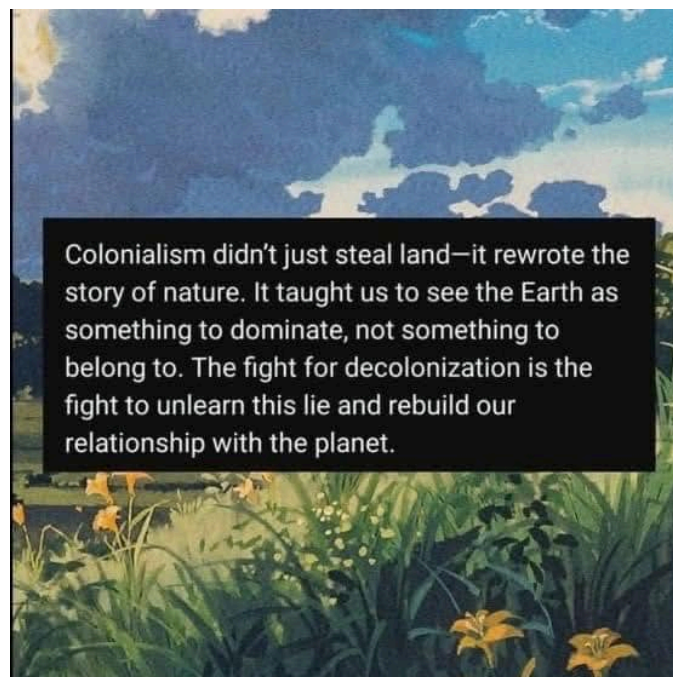
The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* offers Lacombe very high praise, though with a bit of qualification:

“Lacombe was in some ways the archetype of the Oblate missionaries who served in western and northern Canada. What made him stand out from the others was his great love of travel and adventure, the degree of his dedication to the Indians and Métis, and his ability to relate to everyone he met. Lacombe was at home in the midst of royalty, bishops and cardinals, white parishioners, or native people. In an age characterized by deep religious and ethnic divisions, he made lasting friendships with numerous English-speaking Protestants. As a missionary, he shared the prejudices of his time *vis-à-vis* the First Nations; he felt that they had to be civilized, Christianized, and incorporated into the mainstream of the more progressive and capitalistic white community. Nevertheless, he was genuinely concerned for their welfare, and he attempted to improve their material well-being. They understood, and their trust is reflected in the names they bestowed on him. The Cree named him Kamiyoatchakwê, “the noble soul,” and the Blackfoot called him Aahsosskitsipahpiwa, “the good heart.”” (*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*)

*In all, a visually spectacular and very rare example of religious chronography, and a fascinating artifact of early attempts to bring Catholicism to the indigenous peoples of the northern Plains.*

### References

OCLC 38942336 (Newberry, Smithsonian, Yale). Philip M. Haley, *History of the Catholic Ladder* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1993). Raymond Huel, [“Lacombe, Albert,”](#) in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed November 1, 2024. See Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*, pp. 150-157 for an illustrated discussion of the development and reception of the Catholic Ladder.



## **Guam's Indigenous Groups Challenge US Militarization, Colonization**

On October 14, a Chamorro-led advocacy group, Prutehi Litekyan: Save Ritidian (Prutehi), submitted a complaint to the United Nations special rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples, **alleging various human rights violations committed by the US government against the Chamorro people.**

**Human Rights Watch fully supports the request** to the special rapporteur to investigate allegations of US human rights violations. The US government **should heed the serious concerns raised by the Chamorro people** and ensure the realization of their human rights.

[LEARN MORE](#)

## **Tribal Lands Were Stolen. What Happens When Those Ancestral Territories Are Returned?**

**Joseph Lee / Vox**

The land back movement is long overdue justice. It is also a climate solution.



**California has agreed to return portions of Indigenous lands amid a massive dam removal project along the Klamath River. (photo: Brian van der Brug/LA Times)**

### **27 November 24**

On a freezing January morning in 1863, American soldiers attacked a Northwestern Shoshone camp along the Bear River in what is now Idaho and slaughtered hundreds of Shoshone people in what is most likely the largest massacre of Native people in the US on a single day. The massacre

was horrifically brutal. “[The soldiers] would grab the small children by their braids and crush their heads and bodies into the frozen ground,” Rios Pacheco, a Shoshone tribal elder, said.

Pacheco told me that, for generations, Shoshone people passed down stories about some parents being forced to let their babies float down the river that day so that their crying would not alert the soldiers to where a group was hiding along the riverbank.

After losing their territory over the course of decades to Western expansion and violence, the tribe went generations without collectively owned land.

But in 2018, more than 150 years later, the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation bought back over 500 acres of land at the site of the Bear River Massacre.

Since European colonization, Indigenous nations across North America have [lost nearly 99 percent](#) of their land. That seizure of Native territory and the development of American industry led to a devastating loss of life, culture, and community. It also set humanity on a course that was harmful to the environment. Western development has led to habitat and biodiversity loss and fueled climate change, spurring more extreme weather, such as drought, wildfire, and floods that have grown worse and more frequent.

The Bear River land purchase was part of a growing movement, generally referred to as Land Back, that’s empowering Native people to address generational trauma and restore landscape health.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of acres of ancestral territories have been returned to tribes. The movement is part of a larger reckoning, too: Last year, the US government concluded its [Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations](#), a decade-long effort to acknowledge historical wrongs and return land to tribal ownership. Over the course of the program, [nearly 3 million acres](#) in 15 states were consolidated and restored to tribal trust ownership.

Land Back success stories often come with splashy announcements, but what tribes do afterward isn’t as well-publicized. And it’s in these often overlooked stories that tribes are doing work that doesn’t just help heal the injustice they suffered, but creates meaningful steps to adapt to climate change and build a more resilient environment.

The Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation plans to embark on an ambitious restoration project at the massacre site, which they call Wuda Ogwa. The project will help make the area more climate resilient through the planting of native trees and the restoration of a wetland complex, which will add an estimated 10,000 acre-feet of water or more to the Great Salt Lake, which is disappearing because of extreme heat and drought.

After the Shoshone were displaced from the land, the massacre site was looted, and in the following years, the site was used by settlers for everything from cattle grazing and farming to a railroad and a failed resort. During the Great Depression, Russian olive trees were planted to help reduce soil erosion, but those trees are now considered an invasive species that sucks up water.

Over the years, this all took its toll on the land. It also reduced one of the key water sources that feeds the Great Salt Lake. Now, drought is making the situation worse.

As they work to overcome years of oppression and violence, the Northwestern Shoshone are also focused on healing the land. “We’re going to start to use that land as a place to regenerate not just the Earth, but also the people,” Pacheco said.

For Indigenous communities, land has never been about simple ownership, but instead is about building a deep, complex relationship with the land. Now, as they begin to reclaim more and more ancestral territory, tribes are demonstrating that Indigenous communities can lead the way on climate adaptation through creative partnerships and ambitious restoration projects.

All of this means that Land Back is not only an important cultural story, it could also prove to be a key part in the fight to build climate resilience.

### **What is the Land Back movement?**

Although Indigenous people have been fighting for and regaining their seized land for hundreds of years, the modern concept of Land Back, sometimes backed by social media campaigns and well-heeled nonprofit groups, has only emerged more recently. The #LandBack hashtag, in particular, has found its own cultural niche thanks to moments like the viral social media posts shared by groups like the [NDN Collective](#) or influencers like Blackfoot meme creator Arnell Tailfeathers from Manitoba.

Throughout the 20th century, many tribes steadily built up the funds to buy back their land. In the [21st century alone](#), dozens of tribes and Indigenous organizations have reclaimed tracts of land that total hundreds of thousands of acres across the country.

Increasingly, tribes are finding new allies in conservation and environmental spaces, who recognize the positive impact that tribal land stewardship can have on the environment.

Land Back can come about in different ways. Sometimes, tribes are able to directly buy back land with their own funds, as the [Winnebago Tribe in Nebraska](#) did. A nonprofit group can buy land for a tribe before donating it back to them, as the Trust for Public Land is doing with 30,000 acres it is returning to the [Penobscot Nation in Maine](#). In 2018, an [individual](#) gave a couple acres of land back to the Ute Tribe just a few years after buying it.

Then there are more nuanced co-management situations, such as [Canyon de Chelly](#), which is a National Monument under the purview of the federal government, with the Navajo Nation maintaining some land and mineral rights. Most tribes, however, say that full ownership with no strings attached is the best way to uphold tribal sovereignty.

Jan Michael Looking Wolf Reibach is the tribal lands department manager for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. “I think the most complete answer for a tribe is when they can recover the lands and have sovereignty over their lands and exercise our sovereignty,” he said. “The strongest and most powerful way for the tribe to restore our connection and bring healing to the land is when it comes back into tribal ownership.”



Anne Richardson is the chief of the Rappahannock Indian Tribe, whose ancestral territory is located in what is now Eastern Virginia. Richardson, who can remember her father and grandfather fighting with the state for recognition of their sovereign rights, believes that tribes are proving across the country that everyone else should have been listening to them all along. Traditional knowledge, passed down through generations, was once derided as primitive by Western scientists, but Richardson believes acceptance of that type of knowledge is finally beginning to happen. “Scientists are amazed that we had this knowledge and we never had a degree in science,” she said. “They need that traditional knowledge because our people flourished on these lands for thousands of years.”

Land Back projects are a chance for the tribes to build stronger relationships with each other and the land. Along the way, water is getting cleaner and land is becoming more climate resilient, even as the political outlook in the United States looks grim for the climate.

President-elect Donald Trump has promised to withdraw (again) from the Paris climate agreement, among other actions that experts say could prove disastrous for the environment. These include opening public lands for oil drilling and resource extraction, as well as rolling back environmental regulations and undoing climate-friendly federal programs like tax credits for home energy improvements.

Under these circumstances, any climate adaptation projects could prove to be invaluable mitigation against an administration that could add an [estimated 4 billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions](#) by 2030.

Jason Brough, a Shoshone PhD student in anthropology and environmental policy at the University of Maine who has helped to map the Wuda Ogwa site, said that tribal Land Back projects could serve as a kind of safety net against potentially harmful federal climate policies. “If Indigenous communities and their partners can have these little niches where animals and plants are safe, that could be really important to get us through these next few years [under Trump],” Brough said.

Of course, tribal sovereignty also means that tribes could decide to use the land they regain for something other than climate projects, per se, including for [housing](#) or economic development. But although there are many different Land Back projects with a variety of goals and processes, Reibach says the ultimate goal is the same: rebuilding a healthy relationship with the land and each other based on reciprocity rather than extraction.

“Regardless of the project or the reason to acquire land back into tribal ownership, the process is very healing for us because it restores our connection to the land,” he said. “We view these lands as being part of us.”

### **Why Land Back can be a climate solution**

Across the country, tribal Land Back projects are proving, acre by acre and tree by tree, that their work is benefiting the climate.

In Virginia, the member tribes of the Indigenous Conservation Council for the Chesapeake Bay are engaged in Land Back and restoration projects to help blunt the impact of climate change on

the Chesapeake Bay, which could see more than 5 feet of sea level rise in the next century. In 2022, for example, the Rappahannock Tribe reclaimed 465 acres of land on what is called Fones Cliffs in Eastern Virginia. The tribe's work on the land includes herring restoration, oyster restoration, and native tree planting. Much of the land was previously a large cornfield, and chemicals like phosphorus from fertilizer have degraded the water quality in the river.

Two hours south, the Nansemond Indian Nation is working to reduce invasive species, protect against erosion, and restore water quality on a piece of land they acquired earlier this year that was once the site of a cement factory. Cameron Bruce, the Environmental Program Coordinator for the Nansemond Indian Nation, says he has noticed more birds and larger herds of deer on the property since the tribe began restoring it.

In Oregon, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde is working to restore the Willamette Falls area, which was recently the site of a paper mill. Lindsay McClary, restoration ecologist for the tribe, is working with her team to restore stream flow, replace culverts to create fish habitats, remove invasive species, and bring back fire to the landscape. Last year, the tribe conducted a prescribed burn on one piece of land for the first time in 100 years. McClary says that the impact of Indigenous land management is particularly clear in places like the Willamette Falls site, which was previously home to a Blue Heron Paper Company mill. "We're helping restore some areas that were flooded by someone else's maybe less than thoughtful decisions," she said.

"We see time and time again, those places become productive ecologically," Jason Brough said of Indigenous projects on reclaimed land — meaning those lands "start having benefits for not just our own communities, but for everybody."

For Brough, Wuda Ogwa carries extra personal significance. One of Brough's ancestors was shot in the chest at the Bear River Massacre but survived.

Rios Pacheco says that only one or two people from most family groups survived, but the fact that those people now have many descendants is a mark of the tribe's resilience. Despite the pain and trauma that Brough still says exists at the site, he and the tribe are looking toward making it better for the future. Brian Andrew, the project engineer, said their approach to restoration is not simply returning the site to the way it was before the massacre. "We don't want to put exactly what was there because we want things to flourish and can survive in today's climate and future climate scenarios," Andrew said.

In some ways, it is remarkable that just a few years after regaining such a culturally significant piece of land, the tribe is already working on a project that could benefit the entire region by adding desperately needed water to the Great Salt Lake. "That's what's beautiful about it," said Maria Moncur, the tribe's communications and public relations director. "We did it for our people, and it just so happens to help the watershed."

"I know it's a struggle," Brough said. "I know we've been trying for over 500 years. But we're at a junction right now where they get to make that choice again ... between a path of living with Earth or a path of living against Earth."

In early November, the Northwestern Shoshone organized a community planting event at the Wuda Ogwa site. Over two days, hundreds of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous volunteers came to plant thousands of new trees. Tribal leaders say that this work strengthens the tribal community and the environment, but also works to improve their ties with non-Native neighbors and community members.

“What we’re doing at that massacre site is we’re paying tribute back to those victims,” George Gover, the executive director of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, said. “We’re honoring them by putting water and life back into the Great Salt Lake. That’s what this project is all about: life.”

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The Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress collects, preserves and makes accessible the firsthand recollections of U.S. military veterans who served from World War I through more recent conflicts and peacekeeping missions, so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand what they saw, did and felt during their service.

<https://www.loc.gov/programs/veterans-history-project/about-this-program>

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**Community members ask Washoe County commissioners to restore library funding** ([kvn.com](http://kvn.com)) — Reno community members are rallying to restore funding for the Washoe County Library System after a critical funding measure was rejected. The library, a vital resource for many, faces potential staff layoffs and service cuts, prompting local advocacy and petitions.

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Trump says he will nominate Kash Patel as FBI director

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<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/environment/2024/11/29/bring-back-the-bison-indigenous-ranchers-in-texas-push-for-buffalo-conservation>

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