

Where Landscape and People Place their Heart: The Kogi Tribe and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta

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Displacement of traditionally held lands and waters from its people is not simply a loss of chattel. For Indigenous cultures of the Kogi, Arhuaco, Wiwa and Kankuamo Tribes and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia, it's the loss of identity. It's the severance of a compact between people and Sezhankwa, the great mother of nature, to care for one another. It's the dissolution of nature's logic, orientation and guidance through life and death. Drawn from personal travel and discourse, this paper addresses the mutual respect and intimacy the tribes and landscape have for each other, and the trauma to both from threats to their spiritual ways of life.



Photo 1: Spiritual Leaders of Arhuaco and Wiwa Tribes, by Author

When the Spanish arrived to colonize South American Indigenous civilizations of the Sierra Nevada, each of its tribes responded differently. The Kankuamo remained in their villages, only to lose their ancestral language and customs. The Kogi climbed high into the rugged mountains, the Conquistadors unable to follow. The warrior Wiwa and Arhuaco were able to resist colonization in the mid and lower tiers of their ancestral mountain. However, with the arrival of the Capuchin missionaries during the 1920's, they migrated up the mountains to avoid cultural cleansing. There they joined the Kogi, each sharing their respective teachings and language while maintaining their individual traditions.

Based upon a sacred vow made with Sezhankwa, their shared imperative is to uphold the Great Mother's original law – that all must protect and nurture the planet, our home. For this reason, they work and live together committed to their primary mission – serving as caretakers of the Earth.

Their ancestral lands, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is a triangular massif tectonically bordered by faults and lineaments on its three sides, a snow-covered pyramid uplifted 18,000 feet above the Caribbean Sea.¹ Containing Earth's full bio-diverse ecological range, the Sierra's 600 streams birth thirty-six major rivers. To the tribes, the Sierra is a reflection of the entire Earth: the entirety dependent upon the Sierra's constituent parts, an interconnected web of life. Individual parts equivalent to the whole, each atom contains the essence of all lands, waters and skies – Blake's first stanza of "Auguries of Innocence."² Consequently, logic holds that their rituals extend beyond traditional lands, encompassing the entire world system. In this light, the well being of their mountains, embracing the well being of the Earth, counsels: they must preserve their traditions.³

Fundamental to their way of life is the belief in *Aluna*, Primordial Consciousness. For them, the entire world system is connected through *Aluna*. From *Aluna*, the physical world is realized as male and female polarities as the entirety of Nature and individual physical bodies. The magnetic correspondence of male and female energies is a direct reflection of male and female natural polarities.

The tribes receive guidance and wisdom through their spiritual leaders, the *Mamos*, trained to abide in a state of constant consciousness of *Aluna*. Cultivating full awareness of the Earth's connections and the efforts necessary to assure the well being of its inhabitants, the *Mamos* maintain a deep communion with the spirits of each animate and inanimate thing, and their roles within the whole system. Their vow is to keep the balance and harmony of all forces within *Aluna*. Through the *Mamos*, holding deep respect for Sezhankwa, life force of the Earth, the tribes perform their sacred work through ceremony, rituals and *pagamentos* (offerings).



Photo 2: Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, by Author

The *Mamos* maintain their sacred sites, extending from the ocean and through the river basins, connected to one another in a grid up the mountain to the ridgeline, to keep them activated. As with a closed circuit electrical system, if one goes off line the whole system can shut down.

From the mountains, they've observed the destruction of the world's ecosystems. As with changes throughout the Earth, the tribes have seen the snow cease falling and the rivers dry up. Of eight Sierra ridges once snow-covered, only one remains. Impending seaport construction along the north coast of

their ancestral lands, as well as incompatible development of the lower foothills, threaten the fifty-four of their sacred sites circling the base of the mountain massif that mediate with the sea.

Implicit in their way of life is the fundamental question: Are there boundaries between psyches of Mind, Landscape and Divinity? What is the nature of their relationship? Across the philosophical and spiritual spectrum⁴ abides the rationale that reaches beyond the idea of permeability: witness to people's being of their landscape, landscape's being of its people, divinity a composition of the entirety.

Rather than an identity based upon contrast with 'other' – a relationship of agent, action and object, equivalent to Mahayana Buddhist's 'duality' – the intimate Indigenous identity reflects upon a mutual relationship of interrelated dependency. Together, the Indigenous tribes and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mutually contribute to the steady state equilibrium of the operations of nature. Their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual intimacy impacts outer, inner and secret levels of life. Without inhabiting their ancestral sacred lands without impediment, the *Mamos'* work is impossible.

The necessity to assure the interdependent relationship of people and landscape from damage or destruction is the focus of this presentation.⁵ People and landscape severed from each other is a severing of stories from ancestors, sinew and blood from mountains and rivers, breath and heat from winds and currents, hearts and souls from transactional grounds with divinity. Loss of healers, teachers, lovers, companions.

*We are eager to protect our sacred sites because these sites are like the eyes, ears, lungs, arms of nature. Each site is a Being; a mother or father spirit who is alive and has a spirit. Our rivers are like the veins that run from the head in the glacier peaks thru the body of the mountain. If these things are destroyed, it will bring an end to our indigenous culture, it will destroy us as a people.*⁶



Photo 3: Sierra from Santa Clara River, by Author

Notes

¹ Charles M. Tschanz, Richard F. Marvin, Jaime Cruz B., Harald H. Mehnert, Gerald T. Cebula; "Geologic Evolution of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Northeastern Colombia." *GSA Bulletin*: 85 (2): 273–284. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1130/0016-7606\(1974\)85<273:GEOTSN>2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1130/0016-7606(1974)85<273:GEOTSN>2.0.CO;2)

² *To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

³ Beliefs are similar to the Japanese Kegon Buddhist School. See Junjiro Takakusu. *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978): 112-130

⁴ The body's skin no more than an illusion marking 'inner landscape' to contrast with 'outside landscape'. For example, see "Timaeus: 90" in *The Dialogues of Plato*. B. Jowett, trans (New York: Random House, 1937): 67; Yoshito Hakeda, trans. *Kukai: Major Works*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); "Letter to Thomas Butts 2 October 1800" in Geoffrey Keynes, ed. *Blake Complete Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): 804; Stephen Whicher, ed. "Nature" in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957): 32; Tenzin Gyatso, H.H. The XIVth Dalai Lama. "Buddhist Concept of Nature" in *Cho Yang, Vol. 1* (Dharamsala: Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs).

⁵ See James Hillman. "A Psyche the Size of the Earth" in Theodore Roszak, Mary Gomes & Allen Kanner. *Ecopscychology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995)

⁶ Jose de Los Santos Sauna, Kogi Cabildo Governor. See Atossa Soltani and Evelyn Arce. "The Kogi: An Urgent Call from Guardians of the Heart of the World", *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, March 2014.
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