

## **SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF OFFERINGS AMONGST THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF THE SIERRA NEVADA OF SANTA MARTA.**

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta population includes some 32,000 members of the Kogi, Arhuaco, Wiwa and Kankuamo indigenous groups, descendants of the Tayronas and preservers of their ancient traditions. There are also approximately 150,000 peasants, and 1.5 million urban dwellers in the lowlands. Of these, the only stable populations are the indigenous groups and although each group has its own language, they all share a similar system of beliefs. Since pre-Hispanic times, the indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada have possessed a worldview, social organisation and living pattern which revolves around the management and conservation of this unique environment, the "heart of the world."

As of their first contact with the western world, the indigenous communities have witnessed the incessant pillage and destruction of their territories, sacred sites, burial grounds, and customs of their ancestors. Of the four tribes that managed to survive the Conquista, one (the Kankuamos) has been integrated into the general Colombian society, while the other three are undergoing various degrees of acculturation due to exogenous influences. Few people currently appreciate the philosophical store of knowledge that the indigenous people hold for humanity through their understanding of nature. Nevertheless, current recognition of the appropriateness of indigenous practices in natural resource management indicates that the negative attitudes commonly held about indigenous knowledge dating from the colonial era have begun to change.

The indigenous groups live in a complex-ranked society in which lineage plays a major role. The true power of decision making in personal and community affairs is

concentrated in the hands of the native priests or Mamas, who possess a profound knowledge of their environment in astronomy, meteorology, ecology, and use this knowledge to plan their agronomic calendar and for the lineage-based distribution of lands and crops. The delicate balance between man and nature, which not only refers to the subsistence of resources such as water management, forest conservation and crops, but also to the spiritual and moral balance of the individual is easily disturbed by irresponsible human actions.

Respectful agricultural rituals play a prominent role in indigenous religion and practices. Planting and herding are submitted to varied ritual rules timed according to astronomically determined seasons. In other words, the ritual calendar corresponds to the agricultural cycle.

It is believed that all native food plants have their “fathers” and “mothers”, and crop fertility has to be insured by offerings to these spiritual beings. Soil types such as clays, humus, etc., are ritually named as are the categories of rains, winds, and lagoons, along with the cardinal points to which they are associated

Kogi society is strictly hierarchical. At the top are the Mamas (derived from 'mamos' or sun), the spiritual leaders or priests, whose education is one of the most remarkable aspects of their society . Ideally, future priests are chosen by divination and undergo their training from birth. Full education lasts 18 years and takes place in special temples in the Sierra, during which time the 'moros', or trainee priests, are deprived of daylight as far as possible. Training is split into two periods of nine years each with puberty in between, at which point either the 'moro' or his teacher, can decide to discontinue the process. It used to be the case that girls would be educated too, but within the last three or four generations, this seems to have lapsed, only some girls given a basic education 'in the manner of the ancients'.

The Mamas return to society at about age twenty invested with the moral and spiritual attributes to lead and guide society, but with no practical knowledge. Their austere education preserves them for 'the delicate task of preserving the universe, and they should avoid physical work because of the dangers of pollution. Practicalities are left to the Comisario, or secular village headman, who works in conjunction with the Mama. Cabos are the assistants of both Mamas and Comisarios and have less authority. Mayores is a term given to reputable older men whose status gives them some authority with their kinsmen and the younger people.

The very close contact that these mamas and all these stewards (Mayores, Cabos, and Comisarios) have with nature and natural phenomena give them a clear sense of cycles that they have to maintain so they developed a close and unique connection with the lands and environments in which they live. They have established distinct systems of knowledge, innovation and practices relating to the uses and management of biological diversity on these lands and environments as a result of a very complex system of offerings (pagamentos) in which each of the persons of the community act as stewards of a sacred territory.

Traditional ecological knowledge is based on observations and experience, evaluated in light of what has been learned from the elders. The indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta have relied on this detailed knowledge for their survival--they have literally staked their lives on its accuracy and repeatability that at the same time is reflected in the system of offerings. This knowledge is an important source of information and understanding for anyone who is interested in the natural world, the place of people in the environment and the spiritual significance that is immersed in the sacred geography of their territory.

While the scientific perspective is often different from the traditional perspective, both have a great deal to offer one another and working together is the best way of helping us achieve a better common understanding of nature, but it is still very difficult to create an atmosphere of confidence with the indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in order to participate of their systems of knowledge and beliefs, that only can be gained with a continuous contact with some of the traditional authorities through years.

It might be a simplistic way to classify the type of offerings made by the indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada, but it is an effort made by the author to present a very complex system of controlling their sacred territory with offerings. There seem to be three kinds of offerings: a group of rituals in order to keep natural cycles going in which offerings with stone beads are buried in special places, or thrown into the ocean or hidden in little caves in the paramos or snow peaks. A second kind of ceremonies are made in order to pay for misuse or misbehavior in personal matters with little knitted bags (mochilas) in which they place pubic hairs, cotton with semen or menstrual blood that are placed in sacred places according to the type of fault. And the third kind that are to pay for the use of natural resources that have many variations, this attitude is exemplified by rituals where the need to pay for the use of an particular species of tree to build a bridge, consists of a complex ceremony whereby plantlets of the same species dispersed in the forest and are tended and fed with sacred food, thus favouring their survival. (Kogi: Pedro Sundenkama personal communication).

An more lasting example of indigenous environmental awareness is evidenced by changes in subsistence patterns within the last 500 years from the ancestral Tayrona intensive terrace irrigation agriculture to the modern use of mixed starchy crops, and the adoption of cash crops, oxen, and trade relationships, as mechanisms of

sustainability to counterbalance the colonisation of part of their territory. This as the result of a very complex process of divination that allows the adoption of new products, that are not indigenous of these territories.

The time has come for our industrialised and secularised society to learn from indigenous society, incorporate moral values, and envelop an ecological understanding in social action and economic behaviour. Knowledge must come to form part of a mode of life and post-modern man will need a new approach on development that protects the basic resources, which assure the survival of life on our planet.

The spiritual significance of our territories are lost and only through a better understanding of natural phenomena and the effects of our “toys” like the indigenous call our technological items, we might be able to improve in having a more respectful view of nature, that is a way start to recover the real meaning of our territories and life.

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