

The Colombian Coffee Tribe – A Lost Culture

Posted on *October 22, 2014* by *Cecilia Borjeson*

A Lost Culture

Direct decedents of the ancient *Tairona* civilization, a highly advanced culture that flourished in Northern Colombia circa 1,000 AD, the Kogi are one of the last surviving tribes from the pre-Colombian era. Inhabiting a set of isolated mountain slopes hidden deep inside the jungle of *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*, the Kogi live the same way as they have done for centuries. Obeying by ancient laws and rituals they live in perfect unison with nature; their world completely untouched by the Western world. Towering 18,000 feet (5500 m) over the sea and 8,000 sq. miles (17,000 km²) across, their pyramid shaped mountain stretches from the tropics of the Caribbean coast, to arctic climate and snow-capped peaks, and holds in its fold every eco-system imaginable. It is in fact an exact mini-replica of the planet itself.



"... their world completely untouched by the Western world"

The Kogi call it "The Heart of the World", and they see themselves as the "Elder Brothers", who have come into this world with the sole mandate of caring for and protecting the earth. They refer to all non-indigenous outsiders as "The Younger Brothers", who are continuously exploiting and – in doing so – slowly killing the world, "The Great Mother". The Kogi very rarely interact with modern civilisation and keep outsiders at bay from their ancestral lands, in order to preserve their traditional way of life.

Breaking their silence

In 1988 the Kogi Mamos (priests) famously broke their silence. Spurred on by the recent escalation of climate change, they allowed *BBC* reporter *Alain Ereira* to film a documentary about their culture. It was a historical moment – never before had a Western journalist been granted passage inside their sacred lands – and the purpose of the documentary was a call to action, an urgent message from the Kogi to the Western world to start living in accordance with laws of nature. Or, if

translated into current discourse, provides a very poignant message to live more sustainably. They are credited as being the first to raise warning flags about climate change over 20 years ago, which is evident in the melting glaciers atop their own mountain.



"...We are now living outside of the laws of nature"

"We are now living outside of the laws of nature where nature is now turning against man and becoming the enemy. Climate change is the consequence of the fact that man is operating outside the laws of life and laws of nature, law of the balance of the world. And doing so will destroy the balance." – Kogi, cited by Atossa Soltani, *Amazon Watch CSQ 214*

Google and The Amazon Conservation Team

The Kogi are fighting a constant battle with outside forces to protect and preserve their ancestral territories and sacred sites, with external pressures from investors and plans of railroads, mines, roads and dams. Coming to terms with the need to communicate with the outer world, the Kogi are beginning to learn Spanish and in a more recent attempt to be heard, the Kogi high priest *Mamo Pedro Juan* and Kogi political leader *Santos Sana* accepted an invitation by *Google* and the *Amazon Conservation Team* in June this year. Recognised in the Google talk for their maintenance of highland, lowland and marine ecosystems, the Kogi will work together with the *Amazon Conservation Team (ACT)* and the government of Colombia to protect their sacred sites. For better, or for worse, Google will help putting the mystical Kogi on the map.



Coffee – An Important Source of Income

Coffee is one of the most important sources of income for food and clothing. Already a time-consuming and labour-intensive process, the Kogi have no electricity nor running water yet they continue to grow their coffee in the jungle, in coexistence with other forest species, since the 70s. The coffee bean variety that is primarily used is *Arabica Típica*, the same bean that brought fame to Colombia for producing the smoothest coffee in the world, as it grows well in the forest shade. The Kogi are adamant that this plant was sent by the spiritual fathers and mothers to convey the message that it is possible to have harmony, creating income without harming nature. Tending to their coffee trees, perched on the mountain in their snow-white crisp clothes, they consider their coffee beans to be spiritually cultivated as they undergo a process of singing and blessing their crops.



The

Kogi way of producing coffee is unique in many respects; they only use manure of animals as natural fertilizer, the “control” of pests and diseases is carried out through spiritual sacrifice, and after having been washed in *Sierra Nevada* spring water and dried under the sun, the farmers then embark on an arduous 10 hour trek through the jungle with mules carrying the beans, to bring them to local collection points.

"...10 hour trek through the jungle with mules carrying the beans"

In contrast to the usual method of growing coffee, the Kogi deliberately do not renew the trees nor exchange for new varieties that might be genetically manipulated, despite advice from experts to do so. They maintain that dealing with nature is not a matter of technique and optimal utilization, but a question of balance – a balance that, in part, is provided by the 40-year- old trees.



indigenous organization (*Resguardo Kogui-Malayo-Arhuaco*) provides guidance for growing coffee in each community, as well as processing the coffee beans and getting them to market as. Coffee provides for the livelihood of more than 1,600 families. Any income from coffee production goes towards purchasing and reuniting sacred sites, and maintaining their cultural practices.

The Kalashe initiative

Bonaverde had the opportunity to speak to *Oliver Driver*, the Köln-based founder of **Urwaldkaffee GmbH** and ambassador of the Kogi message in Germany, who has a very special relationship to the tribe. Coming from an engineering background working 18 years as a construction executive and in real estate, he then took a 360-degree turn, moving into personal coaching, ecology and sustainability and authoring several self-help books dealing with self-discovery and shamanism. **Hey Oliver, thanks for taking the time to speak to us! With the Café Kogi project, you have now added coffee as the latest addition to your curriculum vitae. Was there a certain event or discovery that propelled this career change and outlook on life?** *"Looking back each step seems to make sense, but very often life is alike a chute. You make a small step forward and then the journey begins. Everything started when I had a herniated disc in 2005 and no medicine could help – but a shaman could. I am engineer. That spiritual world did not exist for me until then, but from that time on I tried to investigate, what is the truth behind shamanic healing."*

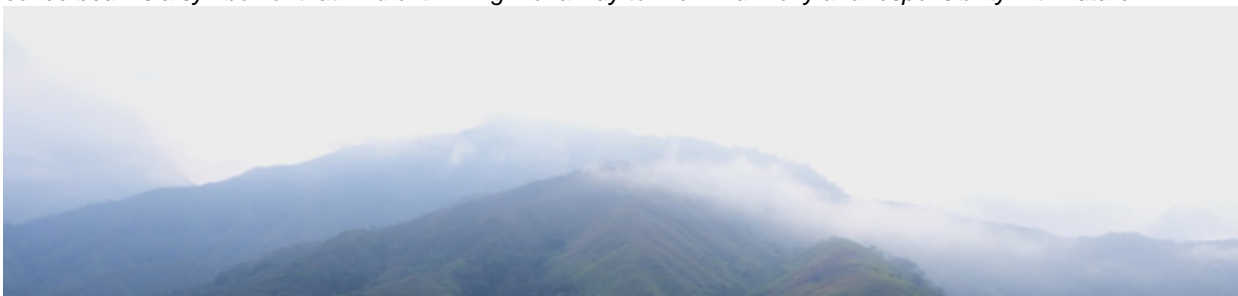


It

was during a Kogi convention at Bonn's *Fair Trade Office* in 2013 that he first came in contact with *Máma José Gabriel*, a high priest of the Kogi, where they spoke in length about the Elder Brothers and the Younger Brothers' impact on the world. Completely in awe, by his own accounts, Driver afterwards approached the Kogi offering to help with the marketing of their coffee in Germany.

'I had no idea of coffee back then, but one of my strengths – on the other hand – is to rebuild and structure things.'

What is special about Café Kogi coffee – why does it keep garnering rave reviews from roasters across the board? *"CAFÈ KOGI is a very good Colombian Supremo. What is so special – and otherwise I would not deal with it – is the way in which the Kogi care for their coffee, their land and their culture. Everything intertwines. They want to heal the world. To do that, they need to claim back their holy sites, which have been occupied during the last 500 years. Each coffee bean is a symbol for that kind of thinking – of a way to live in harmony and responsibility with nature."*



Máma José Gabriel himself. Who are the people mostly signing up the seminars and who would you like to see there, respectively? *"I would like to see more coffee drinkers! It's mostly people from the ecological movements, there are esoterics, there are people interested in alternative ways of healing and there are Colombians living in Germany."*
What do they bring with them out of it? You speak of 'Zhigoneshi', the principle of give and take. How can we give back? *I do not know what Máma José Gabriel will do in these meetings and workshops. But I know that listening to him will change your mind, as it did with mine. Our way to give back is very easy. I buy tons of coffee and you can give something back by drinking that coffee. Second, we have to change our way of living. We have to get back into harmony with nature."*



The driving force behind our project and Bonaverde is to give the power back to the farmers and enable them to sell their raw green beans straight to the consumer. which provides for a more transparent and fair coffee 'eco-system', if you will... *"The idea of Bonaverde is great! Roasting, milling and brewing in one machine sounds good. It is not so easy to give back the power to the coffee farmers. Coffee has to be roasted fresh. That implies that it should be done in Germany. A good small coffee roastery sells 10 – 20 tons a year for 25 to 30 Euro/kg. Even if you import the coffee directly, you have high costs, which makes it impossible to pay more than 3 \$/pound. And that is not much considering the work on the coffee plantations. My contract with the Kogi has a fixed price for three years, which is above fairtrade. Both parties have the security for their calculations and do not have to stare at coffee charts."*
If you could speak directly to the Bonaverde reader, what would be your message? *"Let's connect people on two continents with the finest coffee to heal the world. Support the Kogi and me, join our crowdfunding on www.startnext.de/cafe-kogi. You can make a difference!"* Support the Kogi and help them preserve their culture, and simultaneously give them the opportunity to visit and share their wealth of knowledge with the rest of the world. Experience the rare opportunity to listen to Máma José Gabriel who is undertaking a string of workshops in Germany this month, and navigate over to the newly launched **Café-Kogi** crowdfunding site now. [youtube width="620" height="413" video_id="v68iuRpi8z4"]

Catch Máma José Gabriel at any of the below dates:

- 31.10 – 02.11 – München: Weltkongress der Ganzheitsmedizin
- 03.11.2014 – München: Weiterbildung für Ärzte und Heilpraktiker mit Máma José Gabriel
- 05 und 06.11 – Köln: Möglichkeit zu Einzelsitzungen mit Máma José Gabriel
- 05.11.2014 – Köln: Vortragsabend mit Kogi-Schamane
- 05 und 06.11.2-14 – Köln: Möglichkeit zu Einzelsitzungen mit Máma José Gabriel
- 07.11.2014 – Frankfurt: Vortragsabend mit Kogi-Schamane im Raum Frankfurt
- 08.11-09.11.2014 – Frankfurt: Workshop mit Kogi-Schamane im Raum Frankfurt
- 10.11.2014 – Hamburg: Vortragsabend mit Kogi-Schamane in Hamburg

- 13.11.2014 – Berlin: Vortragsabend mit Kogi-Schamane in der kolumbianischen Botschaft
- 14.11.2014 – Berlin: Vortragsabend mit Kogi-Schamane
- 15.11.2014 – Berlin: Workshop mit Kogi-Schamane im Raum Berlin
- 16.11.2014 – Berlin: Möglichkeit zu Einzelsitzungen mit Mama Jose Gabriel

Links: www.kalashe.com www.cafe-kogi.com *All pictures courtesy of the Kogi and Oliver Driver.*

Posted in: Mission | Tagged: Coffee, Colombia, Insights, Kogi, Magazine, Mission, Native, Sierra Nevada, Special Report, Tribe | With 1 comments
