

**CONFLICT, SPIRITUAL MEANING
AND ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS .
Offerings made by the Indigenous
Peoples of the Sierra Nevada of
Santa Marta**

By Guillermo E. Rodríguez-Navarro

The native population of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta in Colombia consists of about 32,000 members of the indigenous groups Kogi, Arhuaco, Arsario and Kankuamo; descendants of the Tayronas and guardians of their ancient traditions. There are also approximately 150,000 peasants and one and a half million urban dwellers in the lowlands. The four indigenous groups are the only native, established people. Despite speaking different languages, these groups share a single belief system. From before the arrival of the Spanish, the indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada have had a world view, social organisation and a settlement pattern that revolve around management and conservation of a unique ecosystem that they call the 'Heart of the World'.

According to indigenous accounts of the earth's creation, the area around the Sierra was a circular territory with high mountains at its center and a border, called the 'black line', extending to the ocean where the water cycle ends. This territory is the center of the world and home to the Mother's children who live off her and care for her water sources, lands and sacred sites. Few people appreciate the philosophical depth of the indigenous understanding of the natural world, but negative attitudes towards indigenous knowledge are changing.

Currently there is better appreciation for the effectiveness of indigenous resource management systems. Sustainable management of mountain resources is a vital way to prevent and manage conflict.

Many violent conflicts are about disputes over resources between the mountain and lowland communities. Mountain communities have limited resources and their relations with the lowlands can change and rapidly deteriorate. From the time of their first contact with the western world, indigenous peoples have suffered from plunder and destruction of their territories, sacred sites, cemeteries and ancestral customs. The case of the Kogi people is described here in some detail to illustrate the general situation of indigenous peoples in the Sierra. They have been forcibly displaced several times, even as recently as the 1960's, and now live in the Don Diego river basin.

Lineage plays an important role in the complex, hierarchical Kogi society. The real decision making power over personal and community affairs lies in the hands of priests, or Mamas, who plan the farming calendar and distribute lands and crops according to lineage. They are responsible for the delicate balance between man and nature. This balance does not only encompass basic resources such as water, forests or crops but extends to the moral and spiritual balance of individual community members. Kogi society, for example, is strictly hierarchical. At the top we find the Mamas, or priests, whose education is one of the most striking features of their society.

Ideally, the future priests are chosen by divination and trained from birth. The training lasts 18 years and takes place in special

temples in the Sierra. When they return to society as Mamas at around the age of twenty they may be trained to lead the community in moral and spiritual ways, but they lack all practical knowledge. Their simple but profound training prepares them for their task of preserving the universe. Practical matters are left to the Comisario or the Mayor, who works together with the Mama. Cabos are assistants to the Mamas and the Comisarios and have less authority. Mayores is a term given to elder men of good reputation whose status gives them authority over their peers and the younger generation.

Mamas, Mayores, Cabos and Comisarios are in close contact with nature and have a clear sense of how to maintain the cycles that rule the ecosystems. Their unique belief system provides the base for the indigenous biodiversity management practice. It stems from a complex offering system in which each individual holds custody of a sacred territory. An over-simplified classification of the offering system is provided here to help understand the highly complex nature of indigenous land management in the Sierra Nevada. There appear to be three distinct types of offering. The first comprises a set of rituals that maintain natural cycles. These are performed by offering stone beads, which are buried, thrown into the sea or hidden in small caves or cracks in fields or snowy peaks. The second type of offering is made to atone for personal faults. The third type acts as payment for the use of natural resources with unpredictable yield. One example dealt with the use of trees for the construction of a bridge. In a complex ceremony, tree seedlings were cleaned, scattered in the forest, and then given spiritual nourishment. (Pedro Sundenkama, Kogi community, personal

communication).

While the scientific perspective differs from the traditional, both have much to offer each other. Combining the two is the best way to achieve a better understanding of nature. However, it is still difficult to establish an atmosphere of trust with the indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta and to take part in their knowledge and belief systems. This can only be attained through longstanding cooperation.

The situation of the indigenous people is critical, more so now than ever before. The intense territorial dispute between guerrillas and paramilitary groups has a disruptive impact on ancestral culture. Traditionally, communities had access to a variety of ecosystems of different temperature and altitude. This enabled them to build a self-sufficient economy that supplied products ranging from salt and fish from the lowlands, to potatoes and medicinal plants from the cold highlands. Today the mobility of communities is severely restricted by paramilitary groups in the lowlands and foothills and by guerrillas in the mid- and highlands of the Sierra.

The conflict has intensified over the last five years and this has worsened the situation for the communities. This has not only caused a fracture in their production system, it has also restricted or even totally precluded access to vital cultural places including sacred sites. Communities have had to abandon their lowland territories and retreat to higher grounds. These displacements are ever more frequent and the obstruction of access to the lowlands has affected the capacity to build up stocks. The most isolated communities now run the risk of starvation.

Wherever the ecology is fragile, peace is fragile too. Resources must be shared to prevent conflicts. Time has arrived for our industrialized society to learn from the indigenous one, to incorporate moral values and develop an ecological understanding that is reflected in its social and economic measures. Knowledge should become a part of our way of life and post-modern man needs a new approach to development in which basic resources are protected and the survival of our planet is assured. Participatory management, adaptive mechanisms and regulations for accessing resources and attainment of a new set of conditions are the most sustainable and realistic ways of reaching solutions.

The spiritual significance of our territories is being lost. Only by better understanding natural phenomena and the effects of our 'toys', as the indigenous people call our technological developments, will we be able to gain a more respectful view of nature and, perhaps, recover the real meaning of our territories and lives.

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NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PEACE PROCESS IN COLOMBIA (1999-2002)

By Cristina Hoyos

This article summarizes a case study about natural resource management in Colombia. The country has been in a civil war for more than 40 years. Conflicts relating to the management of natural resources are rooted in economic, territorial, social and political problems. Economic problems include population growth, poverty, distribution of land, and state politics. Difficult social conditions are the result of migration, poverty, environmental degradation and violence, such as armed conflicts between left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups. To escape conflict, the population migrates into regions where land property rights are not defined or they settle in national parks. In these isolated regions the state is generally weak while other actors, such as illegal drug-traffickers, are strong.

The research was conducted in the *Parque Nacional Natural Tinigua*, or PNNT, over the years 2001 to 2004. This national park is located in the *Departamento Meta* in Colombia and is the only biological corridor that connects the Andes with the Amazon-Orinoco region. The World Bank classified it as an ecological region of strategic importance and accorded it the highest priority for protection because of the outstanding biological diversity. The park is threatened by misleading settlement policies, violent conflicts, cattle-ranching and illicit crop production.