

## Our visit to the Kogi, November 2014

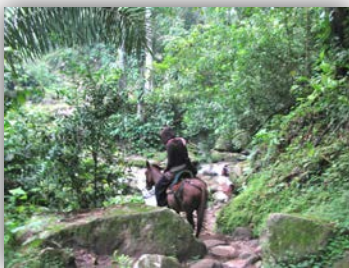


Our journey begins in the southern mountains of Colombia near the city of Pasto. Here we, Fabienne and Jan-Frank, attend an event at the project 'Nabi Nunhue', the Maloca of our friend and shaman Kajuyali Tsamani. Other shamans are invited: a Lakota chief, a Guambiano medicine woman and also the Kogi couple, Jate Tonio and his wife Jaba Margarita from the Sierra Nevada in Colombia. 'Jate' and 'Jaba' means man and woman of knowledge. Both are 'Mama', shaman within the Kogi tribe, descending from an ancestral line of shamanic tradition. Tonio is the grandson of Mama Bernardo who is the oldest and the main shaman of the Kogi. He must be more than 100 years old and still lives in the company of his wife Jaba Antonina. Mama Bernardo calls Kajuyali his son and friend and initiated him as a Mama in 2008. Kajuyali is the only Mama who was not born as a Kogi.

The Kogi are one of the few indigenous groups in Latin America that still live fully in their traditional way while being aware of the world outside. As the Spanish conquerors seized their land, the Kogi fled into the Sierra Nevada. The Kogi were part of the ancient Tayrona culture. Their villages are untouched by our world and they want to remain undisturbed and left alone, now and in future. The community approved of our presence only because Tonio and Margarita invited us to go with them after the event to their land.



### 1<sup>st</sup> day



Our hike up the mountain starts at 3.30 a.m. Three mules carry the goods, two other mules carry us while the terrain is flat in the lower part of the mountain. After six hours we reach the finca of Tonio's and Margarita's family, a few round clay huts, without electricity, toilets or water system. Dawn comes early and smoke is rising from the roofs. We sit in front of our hut and in the darkness we see the main hut where the family is gathered while dinner is being cooked. Only the glowing of the fire is visible through the open door and once in a while laughter that rings with the sound of at least 12 people, stretching from the sounds of a newborn baby to grandmothers, all sharing and living in each others company. How much would we love to experience one night with them in this tight space that appears like a womb, holding together and protecting the whole family.

2<sup>nd</sup> day



Next morning we follow Tonio on a small track through banana and coffee cultivations, wild nature and river valleys, until we reach the hut where Mama Bernardo currently lives with his wife Jaba Antonina. It takes a while until our eyes get used to the darkness and the smoke inside the hut but then we see Mama Bernardo and Jaba Antonina sitting in their hammock with a big smile on their faces. The warm hug and the kiss on the cheek let us know that they were expecting us and that we are welcome. Supported by his grandson, Mama Bernardo walks outside to sit in the warm sun. His body is fragile but his presence, his look and his words are strong and clear. He does not speak much Spanish but thanks to Tonio's translation we are able to communicate. He tells us that he is on his last journey up the mountain, having started in the lowest village in the valley, slowly going up from place to place, carried on the back of his son and in this way saying goodbye to his people. In his home in the upmost village he will rest and wait for his transition to 'Aluna', the spirit world.

Mama Bernardo has not seen Kajuyali for a while and wants to hear about him and the project. We also learn more about the actual 'politics' of the Kogi community and their concerns about the changes in the weather conditions. This year (2014) there was an unusually long drought, for nine months they were without rain which caused big problems for the harvest and the animals. For the Kogi it is a sign and a confirmation that the earth is in serious trouble. During this talk Jaba Antonina prepares white cotton strings black beads are threaded onto each thread. The strings were carefully tied around our wrist. This is a blessing and will protect and support us on our path.



3<sup>rd</sup> day



On our third day Margarita arrives at the Finca, until now she had remained in the lowest village waiting for her daughter to finish school. Margarita is seven months pregnant with her sixth child and if there were not these few drops of sweat on her face you could not tell that she had just hiked uphill. She's about thirty years old - already a grandmother, a midwife and a recognised ceremonial singer, taught by her mother and grandmother. She is an amazing teacher and an example of what it means to be a woman who is always following the tradition embedded in her community and who is aware of her sacred femininity by nature.

Sitting in front of our hut we reflect on some doubts and questions that had arisen. Is the Colombian government using the Kogi for their image? By organising projects such as health centres, schools and environmental ventures they show the world that they care for the indigenous people. On the one hand the Kogi profit from these projects but on the other hand we are concerned that this can have more negative consequences for their culture than other groups caused in the past.

First the Spanish conquistadors with their missionaries and colonists tried to conquer the Kogi, then the cocaine and marijuana mafia started their drug war in the Sierra Nevada. The war went on and became fierce when different groups fought against each other: mafia, guerrilla, paramilitary and army. Despite the suffering and losing large parts of their land the Kogi remained autonomous refusing to become involved with any of the groups. For them the only way to survive was to move higher into the mountains. Thanks to their forced isolation and the strong adherence to their tradition they still live as they always have. But over the past few years so called 'friends' come with their projects, like the government and NGO's. We suspect that this recent development could be a new threat for the Kogi.



As we see with other tribes and ancient traditions from all over the world: as soon as contact with the 'Western World' grows, they have to deal with the attraction of money, getting attention and being important. This has almost always had a negative influence on indigenous peoples. Is this a new virus that infects these tribes who have always lived isolated? We realise that the epidemic disease of materialism, manipulation and power can not be stopped. The disease will develop all over the Sierra Nevada and we can only hope that they will have enough resistance and will be able to recover and become stronger from it. As we share these thoughts with some Kogi friends, they recognise and confirm our concerns, but also show a big confidence in the continuation of their tradition. As we ask if our presence could infect them in a negative way, their only answer is a big smile...

At night we sit outside in the silence of the silver shimmering mountains. 'Mother of the Waters' is the name of the nearest peak and they say that ancient golden 'sewa' (holy objects) are hidden at sacred places on this mountain. The only Mama who knew where they once were buried died some years ago, but the Kogi don't mind that this will forever remain a secret as the golden sewas were offered to Mother Earth and are doing their healing work.

4<sup>th</sup> day

With the first sunlight on our last day we are on our way to Mama Bernardo's hut again. We talk with him about the project 'Gold for the Kogi', an initiative of Nabi Nunhue. Donated gold was melted and forged into new sewas and people also contributed seven pre-Columbian golden sewas from the Tayrona culture. Since years these golden sewas are waiting to be given to the Kogi. By divination (oracle with a crystal in water) the spirits tell Mama Bernardo that the sewas are to be brought to the Sierra after the December solstice, when the sun is rising again at the horizon.



In March, probably during the equinox, all the ancient hidden sewas in the Sierra will be 'open' and interconnected with each other. This will be the perfect moment for them to receive the new sewas. A Mama will carry them as a pair, female and male, to their corresponding sacred places high on the mountain in the paramo as an offering to the Great Mother and to support and increase the healing power of these sacred places. But one sewa will accompany Mama Bernardo in his grave as an offering for the spirits and with it he will continue his work in 'Aluna', Mother Cosmos.

5<sup>th</sup> day

The full moon sets in the west as the sun rises in the east in this very early morning as we say goodbye to Tonio, Margarita and their family. We make our way down on this wonderful ancient paths which once consisted of perfectly aligned stones. As our bare feet touch these rocks we are aware of the many Kogi and their Tayrona ancestors that have walked this path before us. The trails form a sacred web spreading all over the Sierra, nurtured and honoured by their walks and their presence.

In the lower parts of the mountain we come across a drunken man and realise that we are getting closer to where the so called civilised world blends into the authentic world of the Kogi where we stayed the last 5 days. Back in Santa Marta we imagine how a Kogi, coming down from the Sierra for the first time, would perceive this world, the world of the Younger Brother. We see a wounded earth, deep cuts in her body, lots of traffic and people rushing through their daily life. Where to? What for?

But then we remember how Tonio and Margarita moved so relaxed and confident at the airport and in the busy market streets a week ago. What's their secret for

this confidence and inner peace? They know that they are holders of cosmic wisdom and have never forgotten their connection with Aluna. They honour the great mother with every step they make, with every breath they take and in every act they do - and they have never stopped taking care for the Heart of the World.

'Senjarle', thank you Elder Brothers.

