

Message From the Heart of the World

Alan Ereira talks about his encounter with a remarkable people in the mountains of Colombia



Only Mamas wear a pointed hat – a house on the head. The sombreros are hand-plaited as a spiral band

In 1988, Alan Ereira was making a film for the BBC, 'The Armada Trilogy', which went on to win the Royal Television Society Award for best documentary of the year. In the course of his research, he went to Colombia to search out the source of the gold which had fuelled the armies of 16th century Spain. Whilst he was there he visited a great, recently-discovered city, 'The Lost City of the Taironas', in the jungle near Santa Marta, and found that the descendants of the people who had built it – the Chibchas, the legendary people of El Dorado – still lived nearby.

He eventually made contact with these people, now known as the Kogi, who for the last four hundred years have lived in isolation and obscurity, preserving, in cities and farms far up the mountains, a sophisticated and coherent pre-Colombian culture. Ereira was approached by the Kogi 'Mamas' – the priests, who still rule the society – to make a film which would send to the world a message about the state of the planet. For the Kogi regard themselves as the 'elder brothers' whose function is to preserve and maintain the world; and the message is to us, 'the younger brothers', to tell us that if we do not change our ways, then the world will soon die.

The film that Ereira made with the Kogi was shown in Britain last December and is now being televised throughout the world. This is a transcript of a talk he gave at Frilford Grange in February, describing the making of the film.

WHEN I FIRST went into the Kogi world, I had originally gone there because I wanted to make a film about 'The Lost City.' Since there was this extraordinary phenomenon – that the culture that had built it was still alive – I wanted to see whether they would be prepared to tell us anything about it. It took a year to establish contact and get back to the Sierra with a real invitation to meet the Kogi. It was a very surprising thing that they invited me at all, for they had refused all previous proposals to film them. I went up by helicopter to a border-town between the world of the settlers and the world of the Kogi: there are two towns side by side,

one a peasant farming village and the other a Kogi settlement. I was taken to a house and told to wait there, that I would be summoned. I had no idea what to expect. Then I was taken to another building, in which there were assembled a large number of elderly men – the word that sprang to mind was ‘sages’ – all dressed in white robes, all holding their *poporos* (the little pipes in which they keep the lime which they use in chewing coca leaves); very grave people, in the gloom by the fire-light.

They said: well, you have come to speak with us, so speak. I explained why I had come, and told them that if they had something they wanted to communicate to the outside world, I could help them. I tried to explain what a film is, and talked about all the reasons I could see why they should **not** make one: all the dangers I could see in it, the problems it might create for them and the things they would have to accept. I told them that if it was going to be a problem to bring all the things we would need – lights and cameras and generators and helicopters – then we should not do it, for I did not want to get into a situation where I assembled all the equipment and the people, and raised the money, and then was sent away because they could not bear it. This was a long and complicated speech, further complicated by the fact that I spoke in English. My assistant translated into Spanish, and then it was translated, one sentence at a time, into Kogi by a man called Ramon, whom the Kogi had trained to be their interpreter. I also showed them a video camera. At the end of this, they said: we have listened to you, we will analyse what you have said, we will consider and it and we will divine. Tomorrow, we will call you again. And I was sent away.

Making a Contract

The next morning I could see them, up on the hillside, obviously divining, and later I was summoned again to a meeting. At this, a group of the Mamas stood up, one at a time, and made speeches. It became perfectly clear that they had very carefully considered what filming might involve, and that they had distributed the work amongst themselves. Different Mamas were going to be responsible for different elements, and each one spoke

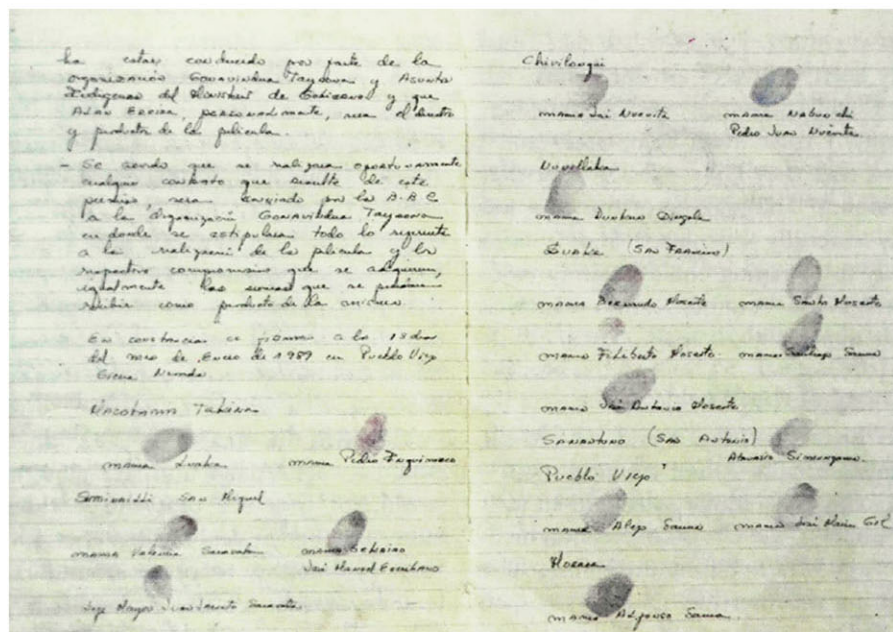
to his brief. The speeches that they made took me through the whole history of the world, explaining in the most extraordinary poetic language the creation of the world, the creation of the younger brother and the elder brother, the exclusion of the younger brother from the heart of the world and his exile in distant lands, his return with Columbus. Columbus is a word which, for the Kogi, conveys everything to do with the conquest, and they call all settlers *colonos*. Columbus himself never came to the Sierra, he only landed on islands on his first trip. It was the first exploratory ships which came down along the junction of Venezuela and Colombia where Santa Marta is. This was therefore the first place that the Spanish landed in the New World; their first contact with the native peoples, as well as the Kogi's first meeting with the Spanish. “After centuries and centuries, the younger brother passed from the other country” said one of the Mamas. “Senor Christopher Columbus came to this land and immediately saw the riches, and killed and shot many natives. He took the gold which had been here, sacred gold, gold of masks, all kind of gold. They took so much, so much, so much.”

This great epic poem went on from one man to another. It was an extraordinary experience for me, because what they related was the film that we were to

make; they spelt out everything that was going to be in it. When they had finished, they said: “Now we are going to draw up a contract, and in this contract we will put all the sequences”. I protested: “But you don't use writing. Why do you need this? I don't want it; I trust you.” And they said, “We know your world. We trust you but we don't trust anybody else. We want it in writing.”

There was a government official with me, and so she drew up the document. It was written out in Spanish, and finally signed with the finger-prints of 28 Mamas from 18 Kogi cities. (This is a large world we are talking about; there are something like 12,000 Kogis living in the Sierra right now.) The contract took a number of days to complete, because the Kogi wrote into it every sequence that they wanted filmed. I was flabbergasted, for the whole idea of a sequence was one that they had only discovered during one night of ‘analysis’, after listening to me talking to them about films for about an hour, and having seen a video camera! Even more amazing is the fact that this contract has proved to be invaluable and prevented many difficult situations. For instance, they put clauses into it which have prevented foreign television companies from re-cutting the film when they show it – something I would never have thought of.

This is just one example of the power of the Kogi intelligence, which I find



The film contract signed with the fingerprints of 28 Mamas. The Kogi have chosen not to adopt a written culture. Courtesy of the BBC.



The main highway into the Lost City connects with a Tairona system of paved tracks. More than 200 miles of these tracks are known to archaeologists, being still intact after 400 years. Courtesy of the BBC.

overwhelming. I don't think that I had ever been in awe of anyone before, but the Kogi Mamas impressed me very, very deeply. I trust them completely and I think that they know exactly what they are doing. The making of this film was very carefully calculated and it is as likely as anything could possibly be to achieve the communication which is their aim.

History of the World

The history of the world which the Mamas recount – their creation myth – has some extraordinary elements in it. It is parallel to the Christian creation myth in ways which I find intriguing. The opening is rather like St John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." For the Kogi, the first thing that

was, was 'The Mother', water, spirit, *Aluna* – all these terms refer to one thing, and like us they use the symbolism of water and earth for spirit and matter. *Aluna* is the underpinning Spirit, which is everything, which is God, which is totality. The Kogi have one idea which I found surprising but wholly sensible, and that is that *Aluna* is not pure intellect, nor disembodied Spirit, but what one might call the 'generative spirit'; it is the life-force, that which makes things live. And it is in this that there is a connection between *Aluna* and the material world, for they see that the world is alive, and a great deal of Kogi energy, of Kogi philosophy, revolves around the business of what it is that makes life live. When we try to talk about this, we use this rather crude word 'fertility' which makes it seem very primitive. But the

Kogi concepts are not primitive, for they understand that life is what we are. They have a very wonderful expression for *Aluna*; they say: "The Mother was memory and possibility", which is obviously an idea which can be explored almost infinitely. In that possibility, there is both the idea that whatever happens can only happen, whatever is can only be, because it **was** already, conceived in *Aluna*; and also it draws limits to possibility, because what has not been conceived in *Aluna* cannot be. In other words, their universe is finite.

In their creation story, the Mother conceives, through an incredibly painful process, all possibilities, everything that can be. She experiments with many possible worlds, and there are narrated entire histories of worlds, of races, of peoples, of conflicts and wars, of empires, which rise and disappear. At the end of all this, there is still nothing; for all this takes place in *Aluna*. Only then does the real world become possible, and the next stage begins when the Mother embodies out of herself the personalities, the spirit forces, who are going to make reality possible. The Mother has no gender. One way the Kogi talk about it is that at the beginning the Mother had a moustache and a beard, and she dressed like a man. But when she had sons, her sons objected to her having these male attributes! Therefore, it is only by embodying, by creating, dividing off, a masculine element of herself, that the Mother becomes feminine – for the idea of gender, of male and female, is essential to life. Then comes the process of nine sons and nine daughters, and the making of a fertile world. Of the nine worlds that are created (the daughters are the worlds), only one of them is capable of fertile growth, and that is the world in which we live.

Then human beings are created, and their function is to look after the world. One of the most important areas of Kogi philosophy for us, is that human beings are not an excrescence on the planet, not some blight on the world. The world

needs human beings. One of the problems for us when we think about the nature of the world and ecological problems, is that we see ourselves as the problem. But the Kogi say that it is how we **behave** which is the problem; in reality, we are the solution.

The Younger Brother

After the human beings, comes the creation of 'the younger brother'. This is a story which is very like the Biblical tale of Adam. Even the physical parallels are striking. The Sierra is 'the heart of the world'; it is an extraordinary place which, physically, is a model of the whole planet, in that all the ecological zones of the world exist between the sea and the mountain top. It is also in the middle of the world, just a few miles north of the equator, with a twelve hour night and a twelve hour day, and the Tairona culture, at its height, drew on both the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans, because of its position.

Ecologically, therefore, it is a model of the planet, and it is physically a paradise. I myself have never been so physically happy in an environment as I was in the Kogi towns. It is like the garden of Eden. And in it, was created the younger brother, who was too dangerous to remain there, and so he was given knowledge and sent away.

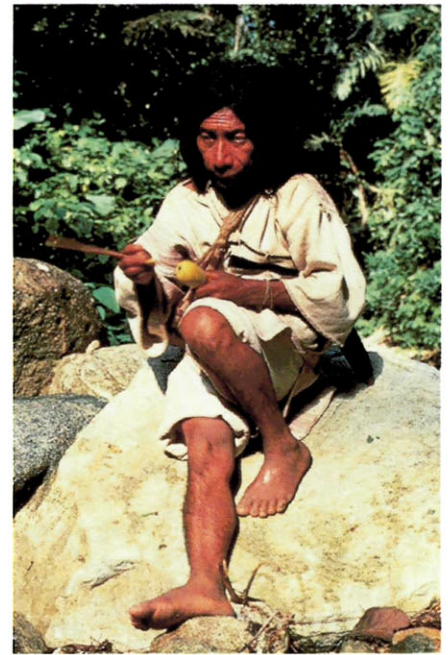
The Kogi story goes on to recount that one day the younger brother will return to the Sierra. And the end of the world comes when he has fully returned, when he has moved back with his machines and taken over the whole area, to the very peaks. And at that point, the world dies – if that is the way that it goes. In Kogi mythology, nothing is inevitable, and their prophecies are not those of inevitability, for they are prophecies in the world of *Aluna*, possibilities made out of "memory and possibility".

What the Kogi have been witnessing in the past twenty years is what they believe are the final stages of the return of the younger brother to the heart of the world. In the 1970s the Colombians built a road from Santa Marta to Venezuela, which opened up the north face of the Sierra. The Kogi have watched the road being built, the *colonos* moving in, the clearing of the forest at

the bottom of the mountain for the planting of marijuana (this was during the marijuana boom of the 1970s) and then the progress of these settlers up the slopes. They have pushed the Kogi higher and higher and higher, until ultimately they have been forced to a height where they cannot grow the most fundamental staples. First they lost cotton, then they lost even plantains.

It was at this point that they decided they were going to have to do something, to find a way of establishing contact with people who would be able to help them. For surely, they felt, not all the *colonos* could be like the people they had met in Colombia; there must be some who would be willing to give them the help they now need to survive. It is important to understand that the Kogi believe their survival to be essential: they have an absolute clarity of vision that they, the elder brothers, work to keep the world alive and to keep it fertile. This is the reason that they have survived at all from the 16th century. It is this vision which has held their society together, and forced them to find solutions to problems which would overwhelm – and have overwhelmed – other societies.

At the same time, they have also seen the catastrophic ecological changes taking place, which is precisely what they expect to happen at this point in history. In the film we show how the snows are retreating from the very tops of the Sierra at a rate of 20 metres per year, how the glaciers are virtually all gone and how the land is drying out. I saw it, it is covered in cracks and the grass is tight-bound, brittle spirals of yellow, dead stuff. But these are just some examples of what the Kogi see. They are also witnessing the extinction of species, not because anyone is killing them but because of changes in the habitat which supports them; they see changes in the patterns of bird migrations, and the invasion of new plants which have never been there before and which are wiping out the existing species. They see a whole raft of ecological change, and everything they see re-confirms their confidence in their own beliefs. This is what their mythology tells them will happen. It is extremely difficult for a westerner, with our rational minds, to go



Juan Jacinto meditating with his poporo

along and say, there are other reasons why these things are happening, because we don't have the same kind of total system that they have. And the thing is, their system actually works. They have known for hundreds of years that if you do **this**, then **that** will happen. We don't yet know this.

Harmony and Health

Behind all this is an idea about the way in which *Aluna* operates, which I think is easiest to understand in terms of health. Harmony is to do with health, and what is going on in the Sierra is linked to the Kogi concept of disease. The life force is chaotic; this is why human beings are necessary. Humans are the gardeners of the world. We balance what is going on – not only physically, but also, in the case of the Kogi Mamas, mentally, working with our minds in *Aluna*. Everything that happens tends to throw the life-force out of balance, and so as changes occur in different ecological zones, they must be compensated for. New balances must be achieved, so that there is harmony between the energies which make the world and the energies which make things grow.

Human beings themselves can be sources, and major points, of spiritual and psychic harmony. When a Kogi meets another Kogi, he says: "How are you?" And the other Kogi, who may be walking up the mountain at a brisk five

miles an hour, says: "I am well-seated". The idea of being well-seated indicates a state of harmony, of being where you should be, where everything is in balance between you and the world.

If we fail to be in harmony ourselves, and therefore cause a disturbance to the harmony of the world, then the life-energy becomes dangerous. It becomes uncontrolled. This is why the Kogi say to us: "You will see new diseases appearing for which you will have no medicine". They don't know about AIDS or BSE, or the other things which are afflicting our plants and people and animals, but they know that we must have new diseases because they see what is happening to the world. Their understanding of personal disease, for instance, is connected to the idea of personal harmony, so that when one of the people gets sick, the Mamas deal with it through interrogation – which they translate, perhaps not very accurately, as 'confession'. They ask the person: "What have you been doing? What has put you out of harmony, and exposed you to the danger of sickness?" This, incidentally, becomes an information system, because through it the Mamas learn everything that anyone in the community has learned. So, if someone has gone down to Santa Marta to trade or to gather shells and has had some kind of experience with the *colonos*, all that information goes back into the pool, and is brought to bear upon the problem of someone's headaches, or whatever.

They draw a clear distinction of course between the world they know of, and the diseases they know of, and the things that we produce. They make no pretence of being able to cope with the diseases which come in from outside – which are catastrophic and carry off, in my estimation, between 60% and 80% of all babies. These are mostly respiratory diseases, and they rely on our help for antibiotics and so on. But within their own world, although it may run contrary to our 'rational understanding' of such things, I could not help but conclude that the Mamas run a medical system which allows people, once they have survived childhood, to live to a prodigious age. They are fantastically healthy, and so are their animals. It is breathtaking to see Kogi horses and cattle. If you have

travelled in the Third World at all, then you come to expect animals to be disease ridden and full of parasites. But their animals are not like this; they are glossy. As to the people: well, I have met plenty of people there who are over 90. 90 is their normal life-span, and if you die before then, then it is considered your own fault! Their plants also grow at a spectacular rate.

So there can be no doubt that the Kogi are very good at maintaining the health of their world. I did not learn how they do it – how they deal with parasites in animals, for instance. The way that they talk about it is that if you behave in certain ways, then the world is out of adjustment and there will be parasites.

Message to the Younger Brother

I want to emphasise that the reason the Kogi are giving their message is of fundamental importance. Everything else to do with understanding more about their world – their society, their philosophy, their religion, and so on – is secondary to the terrifying urgency of their ecological message. I have no doubt whatever that what they are saying about the death of the planet is the absolute, immediate, truth.

What I find surprising is their optimism. They do not see the death as inevitable – but then, as I have said, the Kogi do not see anything as inevitable. There are a number of stories about what happens in the future, the best version of which is that the younger brother returns to the heart of the world to help the elder brother. One has to understand that they do not see the younger brother as a total waste of time; they value the knowledge, the real knowledge, that he was given and which they recognise that they do not have. A recurrent theme in what they were saying to me was: younger brother could help us. They expect the film to be part of the process by which younger brother returns not as a destroyer – Columbus killing the elder brother – but to help the elder brother continue with his work. For they are at the point, they continually told us, where the elder brother cannot work any more.

I myself have developed an enormous respect for their wisdom, and their insight into the effects the film would have. And there is already evidence that

they do know the right buttons to press – for instance, they have just received an invitation to speak at the 1992 United Nations Development Conference in Brazil, although I don't know whether they will go.

I have been working to set up 'The Tairona Heritage Trust', which has various functions. One is to help the Kogi to buy land, which will both act as a barrier to the outside world and ensure that they are not pushed further up the mountain. It will also support medical projects, because western disease is almost the worst threat to them; they need medicines. The most important aspect of it, however, will be what I call 'stabilising the frontier'. Kogis now have to go through, in a more ordered and disciplined way, what the Tibetans went through when they went into exile. There has to be connection between the elder brother and the younger brother, and we have to make that work successfully.

I am confident that the Kogi will be not be destroyed by cultural contact with the younger brother. They co-existed with the Spanish for 75 years, which no other Indian civilisation did without collapsing. They did not just have a trading relationship with the conquistadors; they had a close and intimate relationship from 1525 to 1600. Yet in 1600 they were able, when they were attacked, not only to mount an army of 20,000 people and put up a very good fight, but when they lost it, and lost their cities and their wealth, they were able to re-construct the entire society. This a unique achievement, which singles the Kogi out as very different from other Indian cultures. The missionaries have been through the Sierra over and over again for 400 years – every Kogi town has a church in it – but they have had no effect whatsoever; no converts. The intellectual coherence of the society is amazing. If they are destroyed now, it will be because of physical factors; lack of land to grow food, or lack of medicines.

Alan Ereira has written a book about the Kogi called 'The Heart of the World' (Jonathan Cape, 1990). For further details of the Tairona Trust, and of how to help the Kogi's, please contact Alan Ereira, 90 Summerlee Avenue, London N2 9QH, England