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The Symbolic Landscape of the Muiscas

by

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THOSE who have travelled in the Cordilleras of the Andes have all been struck by the natural beauty of these lofty regions, in particular the high plateaux where the Indian civilisations developed. Nature in general and, above all, the scenery, imposes itself on man, who cannot resist the effects which it has on his feelings, effects which vary, moreover, from one person to another: gazing on it, one may feel impressions of harmony, power, dread, eternity or yet others, according to one's predisposition. Numerous travellers, geographers and men of science, from the 18th century to the present day, have analysed their impressions and have described the profound effect on them of discovering scenery of a beauty, a richness, a nobleness never before seen. In this respect, there is nothing to add.

It is when one studies the traditions of the Indian people who lived in this natural environment—or who live there, if one can still speak of "living" after the destruction caused by the Spanish colonisation—that very interesting questions arise.

Might not this scenery, or these mountain landscapes to be more exact, represent something more than a source of subjective and emotional experiences as seen by the romantic or modern European? Can they have been irrelevant to the intellectual and spiritual life of the peoples inhabiting these regions? If this natural environment had represented nothing for them, in this respect, would these people have put down roots on these high plateaux, which one may justly describe, as more than one author has done, as inhospitable, even inhuman, from the point of view of habitation? Modern scientific explanations which have been given for the peopling of these regions, and for the presence, in this particular place, of civilisations of a high spiritual level—explanations which, in fact, take account chiefly of the material elements of life—are very unsatisfactory. Besides, there was, in the course of pre-Columbian history, a migratory movement towards the high plateaux of the Andes, at least to those which were inhabited by the Muiscas,[1] whose "empire", however, never overflowed to a significant extent into the lower lands which were more favourable to the material life of human groups. How can one explain all this?

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[1] These are the high plateaux of the eastern Cordilleras of the Andes of present-day Colombia, situated in the interior of the provinces of Cundinamarca and of Boyacâ.

"Man … chooses his way of life as a function of his conception of the world and of the place of man in the world: after that he chooses the setting and climate which suits him best".[2]

Several Columbian writers have glimpsed that a relationship existed between the landscape where the Muiscas lived, and their conception of the world, without, however, being able to define it exactly nor draw a conclusion. Giving all due respect to their work and to their interpretations, we must, nevertheless, examine what is known of the Muiscas in this respect from a strictly traditional point of view, in order to grasp the whole importance of this relationship.

Our knowledge in this field is, to tell the truth, limited by the fact that the Muiscas, or Chibchas,[3] have not left many traces in the domains of architecture and the arts (except jewellery, of which, however, the major part disappeared into the crucible of the conquistadores, avid for precious metals); that the cross-breeding imposed on them caused the death of their language and the disappearance of a good part of their traditions, their dress and their religion; and that the few records of Spanish chroniclers are almost the only source of information we have on their mythology and their religious life. Still, we must take into consideration the interpretation put by the latter on some of their observations. To this, one may add the legends still told by the descendants of the Muiscas, various folklore traditions, and above all the traditional elements which have been gathered from those other peoples of the Chichba group who have been able, to the present day, to remain relatively protected from modern influences.

What, then, did the landscape of the region they lived in represent for the Muiscas? The mountain, one may suspect, played an important role in their religious life, and the documents attesting this are numerous. One knows through the chroniclers that certain mounts, described as sanctuaries, were worshipped and offerings were made to them by burying in them objects of gold or precious stones. The most venerated, at the time of the Conquest, were those of Furatena,

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[2] Jean Servier, *L'homme et l'Invisible*.

[3] It would be more correct to limit the name "Chibchas" to the group of peoples who spoke the languages and the dialects forming the lingustic group of this name (often called the "macro-Chibcha" group), and who lived between present-day Nicaragua and the Equator. The Muscas were only one of these families. Certain authors, speaking of the "Chibchas", refer, however, to the Muiscas, no doubt because they were the most homogeneous federation of the "macro-Chibcha" group and represented, perhaps, the centre or the base, if not of a state or an organised empire, at least of a sort of "theocracy", of a vast ensemble united by spiritual ties.

On the other hand, as there were several migrations of people of the plains in the direction of the high plateaux inhabited by the Muiscas, one must admit a superposition of cultural and traditional elements ; one gives the name "Muisca civilisation" or "Chibcha civilsation" to that which the Spaniards met at the time of the Conquest, a composite civilsation which had borrowed from many different cultures.

which, significantly, contained emerald mines.[4] The large rocks were treated as mountains and revered like them. Unfortunately, it is no longer known which mountains and which rocks, in the Muiscas' territory, were the objects of veneration, these elements of sacred geography, no doubt taught by the priests, having disappeared with the Conquest.

The depositing of stones on passes and summits, intended to appease the secret powers which haunted them, a custom frequent among the peoples of the Inca empire, has also been reported of the mountain peoples who were neighbours of the Muiscas; one may therefore suppose that this custom was not foreign to the latter either. It shows, in any case, the importance given to the mountain as the abode of supernatural forces, and as containing vital currents, terrestrial or cosmic.

It is interesting also to observe that rocks covered with red hieroglyphic paintings—undeciphered as yet—have been discovered on the frontiers of the country inhabited by the Muiscas. Paintings of this sort are not found elsewhere and they certainly seem to have marked the limits of their territory, no doubt considered sacred. It is known indeed that these rocks served as places of worship. In general, these hieroglyphic paintings are found where rivers have hollowed out gorges in the mountain chains which border the high plateaux and thus constitute strategic points. These places were also sacred above all others, because they recalled the end of the deluge, as we shall see later. Lastly, it seems that these places were the only ones where trading with the neighbouring peoples, under strict traditional regulations, was authorised.

Petrification also seems to have been invested with importance for the Chibcha peoples: for some, men at death were changed into rock; all the rocks had once been men and would give birth in their turn to humans. But petrification could also be a divine sanction, as in the Muiscas' legend of the Hunsahua, where a brother and sister guilty of incest were transformed into stones.[5] Another legend mentions the supernatural power of heated stones which were used to try to bring about the reappearance of a mother guilty of adultery and her daughter who had been drowned in the lake of Guatavita. In short, sundry information gathered on the subject of the traditions of the regions adjoining those inhabited by the Muiscas attest the importance of mountains and rocks. For some peoples, the soul at death made its way to a high mountain. For others, various ceremonies took place on the top of a mountain, as when ashes were scattered by the priests to bring rain, or when the blood of sacrificed infants was shed on the rocks.

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[4] Although emeralds were in great esteem with the Muiscas where they were among the most sought-after offerings, one hardly knows what they symbolised for them. According to the myth of Goranchacha, a young girl was fertilsed by a ray of the sun, and gave birth to an emerald, which changed later into a hero; should one see there a fertility symbol, or a reflection of the solar light and thereby of the divine power ?

[5] One finds here the two forms of petrification, favourable and unfavourable, as described by M. Jean-Louis Grison in connection with the Incas (*La Pierre et la Caverne chez les peoples précolombiens, Etudes Traditionnelles,* Mar. Aug. 1968).

It is fitting to add to this information on the Muiscas, brief as it is, the much more complete data which is available on the religion and symbolism of two tribes living today in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, to the north of Colombia, the Kogis and the Ijcas, tribes belonging to the macro-Chibcha linguistic family. These tribes, although affected by colonisation, have been relatively spared; they have been able to keep their language, their worship and their dress. The information gathered about them in the last twenty five years is of considerable interest from the point of view of knowledge of the symbolism which was, without doubt, characteristic of the whole Chibcha group, for it reveals the existence of a sacred geography of fundamental importance in the life of these tribes even at the present day.[6]

The mountain is sacred for the Kogis and the Ijcas, and the different peaks of the Sierra Nevada represent the children of the Universal Mother, who created the universe. It is there that the ancestors live. The mountains are given the names of gods, heroes and ancient priests, these, in their turn, representing different principles; the same series of "bonds of kinship" or of correspondences, therefore, unites ancestors, on the one hand, and the mountains which symbolise these principles on the other. The Sierra Nevada itself is divided into four sectors defined by the cardinal points, to which are attributed the names of colours, animal groups, mythical personages, plants, and general concepts, as well as of members of the four principal clans of the tribe. It has been possible to draw up a reasonably complete list of the summits and the gods (or principles) which they represent: there is, for example, that of rain, that of evil, that which created the plants, that which teaches weaving, the father of the sun, the god of punishment, etc.: but the classification of them is not known. It is known only that these associations, these "bonds of kinship", and the contrasts that flow from them, are the basis of the organisation of the life of the two tribes.

Moreover, the mountains, seen as pyramids, are related to the ceremonial houses, with conical roofs, both being representations of the world; the ceremonial house has four openings and its centre symbolises the centre of the universe (one may say that the "axis of the world" is indicated in the ceremonial house by the thread which joins the highest point of the roof to the ground, at the centre of the house, a thread which the Kogis say is the "umbilical cord" which joins man to the body of the Universal Mother). The mass of the Sierra Nevada is itself the centre of the universe, of which the equilibrium depends on the harmony which reigns in this mass, on the one hand, and the commandments which emanate from the ceremonial house, on the other.

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[6] See especially, on this subject : *Reichel-Dolmatoff,, Gerardo, Los Kogi, Bogota, Edit. Iqueima, 1950-1951,* and *Notas sobre el simbolismo religioso de los Indios de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* published by *l'Instituto Colombiano de Antropologia.* Also *Lucena Salmoral, Manuel, Informes preliminares sobre la religion de los Ijca, Revista Colombiane de Antropologia,* Vol. XIV, 1966-1969.

The Kogis make a distinction between the “higher” lands and the “lower” ones. The lower lands and hills, those of less than 1000 metres altitude, are “bad”, without interest; there dwells disease. The higher lands, situated at more than 2000 metres, and limited by the eternal snows at 4500 metres, are sacred; this is the region of the ceremonial centres, the sacred lakes, the places where offerings are made and where divination is practised. Illnesses are looked after in this region. The intermediate lands, where the Kogis live, between 1000 and 2000 metres, are “good” in the sense that they are favourable to agriculture. As to the snow-covered mountains, they are the “beyond”, the land of the dead; no living thing may go there. In former times, man could visit these lands, where nothing aged, but now it is no longer possible.

The large rocks, too, represent mythical personages or deceased ancestors. As to the smallest stones, they serve as offerings. But it is forbidden to bounce or roll large blocks of stone or rock down the mountain, because the order of the universe would be upset thereby. Moreover, all hills and artificial cairns are sacred.

This brief review of what the mountain represents for the Chibcha peoples has enabled us to establish the multiplicity of their symbolism and its whole character. The mountain espressed for them at once ideas of height, of the axis and of the centre of the world, and, in so far as the gods and the ancestors lived there, ideas of immortality, of permanence and of immutability. The return of the soul, after death, to the summit of the mountain represents the return to the Principle and makes of life an ascent, a rising by degrees towards Heaven. But the mountain contained also, in its bosom, some terrible forces, in a state of equilibrium and harmony which it would have been dangerous to disturb. In this sense, it can probably be considered as a representation of the earth by contrast with Heaven, the summit being the meeting-point of the two. If these notions are not new, in view of what we know of the symbolism of the mountain and, by extension and from certain aspects, of the rock, in other known traditions, they nevertheless illustrate once more the universality of these ideas.

If the mountain played an important part in the life of the Muiscas, its complement, water, had no less a part. In fact, if one believes the chroniclers, its worship was predominant at the time of the Conquest. It is, indeed, to the worship of mountain lakes that they referred in the first place. This kind of worship held a wholly central place in the religion of the Muiscas and, moreover, it was still kept up for a long time after Christianisation. All the chroniclers mention the offerings which were regularly made, in the course of feasts and ceremonies, by depositing, on the shores of lakes, gold objects, emeralds, pottery or personal effects.

Moreover, the life of the Muiscas was punctuated with rites in connection with water. The hair of the newborn was cut and, after the first ritual bath, thrown in the lake in tribute to the water goddess. The young people, at puberty, went through a ceremony of purification by water. Women, too, immediately after confinement, retired to the bank of a stream to purify themselves. The priests, in the same way, passed through ceremonies of purification in the sacred waters. At death, bodies were generally buried in caves or wells, but often also thrown into lakes.

The human race—this appears to be the essential fact—sprang from a mountain lake; in the region of Iguaque, an area generally hidden in mists, there is the legendary little lake from which the goddess Bachué emerged after light was created and had struck the surface of the water. She held in her hands a child which, later, she married. This couple peopled the earth, after which they withdrew again to the edge of the lake and exhorted the people to respect the laws which they had given them; then, changing into serpents, Bachué and her husband disappeared into the waters of the lake. This myth of the creation of man is one of the most important in the Muisca mythology and attests the symbolic importance to the origin of life, of the lake, and therefore of water, as the feminine pole of manifestation, a representation of the primordial undifferentiated matter before the light had struck the surface and had caused Bachué to be born. The return, at their death, of Bachué and her son to the lake from which they sprang is, perhaps, related to the Kogis' belief in the return of the soul to the summit of the mountain, to the Centre, to the Origin.

The famous ceremony of Eldorado is described by the chroniclers as the purification of a Muisca chief, who covered his body in powdered gold which he offered to the goddess Bachué as he plunged into the waters of the lake of Guatavita. One can see here also the regenerative side of immersion, re-establishing the tribal chief in a new state, a new function, for the exercise of which he is "reborn", as was the case for the priests. The chroniclers also mention the importance of mass pilgrimages, described by the phrase "running round the earth", in the course of which multitudes of people followed, for twenty days running, a fixed course connecting five sacred lakes, to which they gave homage.

One finds the same symbolism among the Kogis and the Ijcas. Lakes are all sacred and represent, in general, the spouses of the *mamas*,[7] or deceased ancestors, the latter symbolising, besides, as in the case of the mountains, various principles: thus one lake might represent the protective goddess of mothers of families, another might represent the moon, yet another might represent menstruation, or sterility, or the goddess who taught the cultivation of potatoes or the construction of roads; yet another represented the mother of serpents, and so forth. Only the *mamas* and a few authorised men may approach the lakes; if strangers did so, misfortunes would arise, because the equilibrium would be disturbed and bad times and tempests would follow. Nor may stones be thrown into the lakes as this would be to hurt the Universal Mother or her daughters. On the contrary, one makes offerings to them and can thus benefit from the powerful forces which they contain or ward them off if they are evil. Among the Ijcas, too, one finds rites in connection with lakes—baptisms, baths, purifications, and rites related to the idea of regeneration in general—which we have noticed among the Muiscas, and which mark out each individual's life.

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[7] The *mamas* are generally old men who have passed some years of apprenticeship with a master, and who are the guardians, as it were, of the tradition of the tribe, alone having the power to interpret, to transmit and to apply the principles of the religion, and thereby to watch over the preservation of universal order. They are, in fact, a superior class of priests.

Thus one finds among the Chibcha peoples the same main symbolic meanings of water that one meets in other traditions, as was the case with mountains.

Other elements of the landscape were objects of veneration or worship among the Muiscas. Caves, for example, were also places of offerings and, like lakes, often served as tombs. For the Kogis, they are openings in the body of the Universal Mother. One can probably see here the two complementary aspects of birth (for the Kogis the cave represents, to some extent, the uterus of the Universal Mother) and of reintegration of man into the Centre, or return to his Origin.[8]

But the places where the two main elements of the landscape, mountains and water, met were the most venerated of all. The rivers, waterfalls and gorges by which the waters of the lakes flowed away were among the most visited sanctuaries and places of offerings. The story of Bochica, another myth among the Muiscas, was concerned with waterfalls. Chibchachum, god of the earth, annoyed with men, had flooded the world; Bochica, the civilising god, appeared in a rainbow and struck the rocks with his golden rod, permitting the waters to flow away by the celebrated cataract of Tequendama, a holy place above all others for the Muiscas. The idea of regeneration, of a new epoch, suggested by the deluge, is an almost universal myth. But it is interesting to compare this worship of waterfalls and of mountain rivers with the symbolism of waterfalls in the landscapes of Far-Eastern art, where mountain and water, masculine and feminine, vertical and horizontal, contrast with, or rather complement, each other, making fundamental pairs.[9]

The importance of landscape for the Chibcha peoples is further emphasised by the distinction which the Kogis make between beautiful and ugly landscapes. We have seen above what mountain, rocks, lakes and rivers mean to them; it is very interesting to find that the impressions of those who contemplate a landscape in its entirety are themselves a reflection of an aesthetic classification, which once more throws light on the symbolism which the latter contains. Thus, rocks, rivers and trees are beautiful; fields after harvest, sands, and swamps are ugly; mountain landscapes with valleys intersected with undulating crests are beautiful; beaches, the ocean and the hills of the lowlands are ugly or dangerous; the clear, night sky is beautiful. From this point of view, the rising and setting of the sun and moon are neutral.

What is known of the Muisca langauge also indicates that a good number of words expressing concepts of a quite general order contained roots relating to different elements of the landscape, which likewise shows that the latter occupied a central position in the Chibchas' conception of the world. There again, one's studies are complicated by the fact that the Muisca vocabulary contains words arising from different origins, the peoples migrating into the region we have described having brought with them words which did not always supplant those in use,

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[8] As M. Jean-Louis Grison has explained in the article mentioned above.

[9] On the subject of landscape in Far-Eastern art, we refer to chapter 7 of the work of Titus Burckhardt, *Principes et méthodes de l'art sacré.*

but which were used in parallel with them; thus there are often two or three words to describe the same thing. Nevertheless, we feel it would be interesting to mention some characteristic verbal roots.[10]

The particle *gwa* which means "mountain" or "rock", is of first importance in the Muisca language.[11] In many names relating to mountains and in regard to concepts of elevation and verticality, it indicates masculine ideas of lineage, of filiation, of procreation and of youth.[12]

It is interesting, moreover, to find that the word *gwa* has other senses, which seem, at first sight, unconnected with the words mentioned above: that of "fish", and those of "light" and "sun" (in *gagwa,* which also means "son of"). The name of the god who created the universe *(Chiminigagwa)* also contains this same root, without the etymology of the rest of the word being clear, however. Might one see here a manifestation of the fact that the language of the Muiscas was a symbolic language, in which words defined metaphysical principles, which would be applied, over the centuries, in the current language, to different symbols of the same principle ? According to the legend of Bachué, as we have seen, man originally sprang from a lake, whence the idea of birth, even of filiation, which the fish might have symbolised at one time, and of which it would then have assumed the name, as was the case for denoting the sun, at a later time, when, it is known, invaders imposed their sun worship on a section of the Muisca peoples.

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[10] For the Muisca vocabulary, we refer in particular to the work of M. Louis Ghisletti, *Los Mwiskas*, Bogota, 1954, of which we have followed the orthography, which does not always correspond with that used by other authors.

[11] It is found, of course, in a number of geographical nouns : *gwagwa*, mountain chain ; *gwato*, valley ; *gwanto*, *gwantok*, river; *gwanZa*, sand ; *tigwa*, eagle (who sings in the mountains); *pSigwa*, window (from where one sees the mountain shining) ; *kikagwa*, the world (populated mountains) ; and in words expressing the idea of height, elevation and verticality : *gwata, gwate*, elevated, high ; *gwaZa*, below ; *gwaka*, towards the base; *gwatkika*, the sky (the "city above") ; *gwatibita*, peak ; *gwatkiskwa*, elevate, lift. From there other concepts are derived : *ki'ikagwa*, adventure (mountain landmark) ; *kikasmiskwa*, to stray ; *kikastaskwa*, to exile, ban. Lastly, it is significant that the name of the lake from which the human race sprang, Iguaque, contained the root *gwa*, as well as the word *gwataka*, emerald (which s in the mountain).

[12] *GwaSa*, boy; *gwake*, companion, parent, colleague ; *gwasgwa*, baby ; *gwaZa*, pregnancy ; *gwaka*, son-in-law or father-in-law. The particle *gwa'a*, indicating the idea of justice, of perfection, can doubtless be related to the particle *gwa*. Among the Kogis, it is interesting to note that from the word *chi*, mountain, is derived the word *chichi*, baby.

Moreover, the same word *hika*, means stone, rock and cliff and also name, word and speech. One can easily relate this to the abovementioned fact that the mountains and the rocks, among the Kogis, represent ancestors, who, in their turn, symbolise certain principles. From this root are derived, interestingly, *hikaSuZa*, crystal ; *hikabimi*, lightning ; and *hikata*, cavern, among others.

Lastly, we must note that the particle *gwa* is found in several indigenous American languages, from which we may suppose that certain basic concepts of the Muisca tradition were used by other peoples of the continent.

Water, *sie,* played an equally important part in the Muisca vocabulary. This root is found, of course, in corresponding geographical terms,[13] and also in several concepts of a feminine nature.[14] One is probably justified in relating the particle *sie*[15] to the former, the latter referring to a certain number of different ideas, those of light, of brilliance, of nobility, of glory, and of sexual union, and meaning also "moon"; the root *xie,* expressing the idea of purity, also appears to be close to it, as well as the root *xi*, meaning fecundity, growth and seeds, on the one hand, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law on the other. Here, too, one may probably see the application of a verbal root defining a principle, or a group of ideas, relating here to what is feminine in nature, to symbols of this principle, which have changed in the course of time.

The Spanish chroniclers often make particular mention of the worship of stars, sun and moon. But it does seem that these religions were introduced slowly into the Muisca country by peoples whose traditions mingled with, or partially supplanted those of the native population. Thus, at the time of the Conquest, the region of "Zaque" de Tunja (to the north of the Muisca territory, from whence foreign invasions originated, saw the predominance of solar religions at a time when the pantheon of the populations subject to "Zipa" de Bogata, in the south, comprised essentially divinities of a lunar type, such as agreed very well with the worship of lakes, which, as we have seen, occupied a central place in the religious life of the population. Similarly one may suppose that the worship of lakes—characterising a matriarchal society—would have superseded, without however replacing it entirely, the mountain worship predominating in an earlier, patriarchal society. All this is difficult to establish exactly. But the fact that for the Kojis and the Ijcas—being subject to few outside influences and representing, perhaps, the most pure Chibcha tradition—the sun and moon play only a secondary role in mythology and religious life makes one think that the mountain landscape was the most ancient basis of the tradition and represented for a long time the most important "support" of the spiritual activities of the Chibcha peoples.

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[13] *Sieto*, stream ; *xiegwa*, lake (water between mountains) ; *simke*, wave ; *siu*, rain ; *suamne*, marsh *xikika*, bank ; *Suki*, rainbow ; *xua*, rosy.

[14] *Si'i*, feminine genital organs ; *xiu*, perspiration ; *siti*, idea of weakness, *Zebsiesuka*, melt, dissolve ; *xima*, bleariedness ; *ximakin*, blear-eyed ; *opkwaxiu*, teardrop, *sita*, serpent ; *Zi'ita*, frog.

[15] "S" is commonly used for representing a pronunciation a little different, among the Muiscas, from "s", a pronunciation which is near to "sh" in English, the "s" corresponding to the English "s" ; "x" corresponds to "eh" in German "ich". As our information on the subject of the language of the Muiscas is very inexact, it is quite probable that the phonetic nuances indicated by the first Spanish chroniclers are related to essentially different roots.

This seems to be confirmed by the fact mentioned above, to our mind most important, that the pre-Colombian civilisations with the most widespread spiritual radiation developed precisely in the mountainous regions on the dour and inhospitable high plateaux. The Muisca civilisation and the cultures which preceded it evolved in a well-defined territory; a region of high plateaux surrounded by mountains, containing numerous lakes (now, however, mostly dried up), thus in a characteristic landscape where "mountain and water" combined harmoniously. As a Columbian writer very accurately described it, speaking of the high Andes, "the religious feeling of man is measured and enlarged in a rarefied atmosphere favourable to melancholy, where sound-waves spread slowly, creating a solemn silence which invites prayer and meditation".[16] It would doubtless be more correct to speak of a feeling of *nostalgia,* rather than "melancholy"; the landscape of the high Andes fills one indisputably with a certain sadness, which for the Muiscas could not have been other than a feeling of regret for the lost Paradise, of nostalgia, of a desire to *return* to the Absolute. It is significant, as we have seen, that the "federation" of the Muiscas never went beyond a well-defined mountain territory protected from outside influences, and that the peoples who joined together to establish it were of one mind in adopting and helping to maintain, at least partially, a tradition dominated by the presence of this particular landscape. The Muiscas accorded more importance to living isolated in a certain geographic environment where their possibilities of spiritual realisation could expand freely than to extending their power and forming an empire in the lower, but "evil" regions. They lived nearer to Heaven than the people of the plains and, symbolically, participated in a superior degree of existence.

The development of a traditional society in this climate predisposing little to action or to the pursuit of well-being or of material enjoyments and sensual pleasures but, on the contrary, causing melancholy and conducing to contemplation, could only have been possible if the conception of the world of the men who composed that society agreed very exactly with the geographic framework which sheltered it. The contemplation of the landscape of the high plateaux of the Andes awoke in them a nostalgia which provoked an emotional shock allowing them to perceive a reality superior to the physical manifestation which their senses revealed to them, a reality of a spiritual order, archetypal, of which this landscape was the terrestrial expression; their deeply introspective nature, predisposed them to follow this way of knowledge instead of others, or at the very least to give it priority. It will be understood from this why relatively small value should be accorded to explanations of a material order given by modern science in its desire to establish the causes of the development of civilisations on the high plateaux to the north of the Andes, namely, that these causes are related to climate, hydrography, agriculture, to the presence of minerals, game, etc. Indeed, if one wishes to explain this development, we think, on the contrary, that the populations who settled there did so for reasons of quite another order and that they were "predisposed" to choose these places and were guided

[16] Miguel Triana, *La Civilizacion Chibcha*, Bogota, 1921.

in this respect by an interior inclination of which they were not themselves, perhaps entirely conscious.

It is generally admitted that the American Indians came originally from central Asia. It is not, therefore, out of the question to think that these peoples would have migrated and wandered for generations, searching for places which would contain for them lessons and values and which would represent, to some extent, a paradise. Efforts made to establish themselves in a geographic milieu corresponding to a profound predisposition would have been the beginning of a spiritual journey, the first achievement in their search for a "sanctuary", for a "support of the collective intelligence",[17] as proved to be the case with the landscape of the Andes. The parallel between the landscape symbolism of the Chibcha peoples and that of Far-Eastern art is pronounced enough that one can at least admit a close relationship between the two; whether it existed historically or not is of little importance here. But it is worth, recalling that, in ancient China, mountains and rivers were venerated and considered as "guardians" and "regulators of the natural and of the human order", whereof the chiefs of different communities shared the power.[18]

If the landscape of which we have spoken was one of the fundamental principles of the symbolism of the Muiscas, or in greater or lesser degree of those who preceded them, and became thereby the starting-point of a way of a spiritual realisation, might it not still contain certain values, a message perhaps, from which the teachings and benefits could be drawn by our own troubled world?

Alas, all is lost of the teachings of the sacerdotal caste of the Muiscas. It is known only that the priests, who also exercised civil power, at least at the beginning, had to submit themselves to a novitiate of twelve years, during which they acquired powers assuring them of influence over nature and men; they submitted themselves to a very severe régime of abstinence, silence, vigils and chastity and devoted themselves to various practices of spiritual realisation. But we are reduced to suppositions as to the esoteric doctrines which they taught.

Yet one may suppose that these doctrines would have been very near to those which the *mamas* still profess today, among the Kogis and the Ijcas, and we feel justified in stopping here for a moment. Yet what we know of them will be incomplete because we know only what they have been willing to reveal, and it is very possible that they possess esoteric teachings which they do not deem it expedient to pass on to the general public, or at least to those who would use them for unsuitable ends.

According to the Kogis, there was, in the beginning, no order in the universe. It was the Universal Mother who organised this chaos, creating the universe and revealing to man, through

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[17] We have used, in this text, some expressions drawn from the works of M. Frithjof Schuon, in particular *Principes et Critères de l'Art Universel and Images de l'Esprit.*

[18] Marcel Granet, *la Civilisation chinoise.*

the "language" of nature, the law which he must respect and pass on in order to avoid returning to the original universal disorder and thus to the end of the world. Nature herself, as we have seen, is a unity, a family of living beings connected to each other by relations and correspondences fixed by the Universal Mother. All is ordered and classified. In particular, there are two ways of seeing natural objects; each thing is not only the object one sees, and which one can grasp with the senses; it contains an *aluna,* a "spirit" which gives it its true value, which "animates" it, which is in a sense its "genius".[19] It is by this that the Universal Mother speaks to man and shows him how he must treat nature and what are the laws he must respect and the duties which he must fulfil in regard to nature.

The elements of the landscape clearly have their *aluna.* We have seen above what they symbolise, what they "say" to man and the fundamental ideas which they reveal to him. But what will man make of these teachings? What will be the results of them for the conduct of his life? In what sense will they guide him?

The *mamas* show us the way to follow on two different planes. On the individual plane, the purpose of life is to reach wisdom, to "know". But the way that leads there is long, and it is only towards the close of life that man attains this end. To begin with, he must renounce material gain that is the first step towards the acquisition of "knowledge"; in fact, the economic aspect of life is secondary. Next, he must have studied religion, myths, traditions and the genealogy of places and thereby the elements of the landscape, and must have followed and understood the teachings of the Universal Mother as transmitted by the *mamas*; then, when he "knows", he may sit at the centre of the ceremonial house—that is to say, in the centre of the universe—and there meditate, or "speak" with God; he will have arrived at a state of wisdom, which will give him security and serenity.

But it is only at the moment of his death that he will be reintegrated into the womb, the intra-uterine paradise of the Mother, from which he sprang, and where he already is, in a sense, sitting in the ceremonial house in the position of the foetus. But this relates to the corporeal element of man, because and this is most significant—his soul now makes for the summit of the Sierra Nevada, in the region of the eternal snows, where it will remain, returning thus, like the body, to the place from which it came and rejoining the souls of the ancestors.

One can thus accept that for the Chibcha peoples in general, as is still the case for the Kogis, life was a progression, a spiritual ascent, of which the aim was to reach the top of the mountain,

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[19] The Chibchas—or at least some of them—like all primordial men, saw thus, "the reality which lies 'behind' the material plane", the subtle or underlying substance of things which the senses perceive, the reality of the psychic order which "animates" them, giving a meaning to their bare image. More precisely, they saw the "more" in the "less", in the sense that the landscape was for them a reflection of a superior reality which "contained" the physical reality; they added, may one say, to the latter, a "spiritual dimension" which escapes modern man.

and each person's effort must tend towards that. Everything in nature reminded him of it at each instant and each action must contribute to this progression.

It is clear that not all could succeed, but each, according to his capacity, could complete a part of the way at least. We touch here on a very important point, for it gives us an insight into the traditional teachings of the *mamas* on the way which man must follow not only on the individual, but also on the collective or universal plane, the two planes, however not being separable in a deeper sense.

The first duty of man, we have seen, is to prevent the world falling back into the chaos which preceded its creation. Now the world is subject to various forces, to vital, and opposing currents, to principles which are apparently contradictory, even though they are, in fact, complementary. The universe is in equilibrium but this balance would be immediately upset if man did not help to maintain it. Man's role is thus essential in this respect, and his constant concern throughout his life must be to act in such a way that equilibrium is sustained everywhere in nature.

But how will he achieve this ? The *mamas* teach that, to preserve the natural order, man must first "put himself in accord" with the things which surround him. This is the idea of *yuluka,* meaning, in some way, to "identify" with a thing, to make oneself a part of it, to acquire its characteristics. Once "in accord" with this thing, he will acquire its powers or will be able to neutralise them if they are dangerous. There seems to be in this identification, in this union between man and another thing, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between the two *alunas,* one might say, that of man and that of the object with which he "puts himself in accord", an exchange of influence in two senses: the man receives various benefits from the forces which the object contains and at the same time he can act on the thing.

Moreover, there is, for the Kogis, an opposition in the created universe, as between two worlds: that of things "below", tangible things, stones, animals and plants, namely the world of earth, and that of things "above", the sun, moon, wind and clouds, that is, the world of heaven. The constant preoccupation of man must be to keep a balance between the world above and the world below ….This is his role as "mediator" between heaven and earth, his cosmic function: it will be by performing certain actions, or rites—after he is "identified" with things—that he will neutralise any evil forces which objects may contain or will reinforce the good powers, so that the order of creation continues and the equilibrium of the universe is preserved. It is the *mamas* who know what actions and what rites must be carried out and who understand the laws whose observation can alone sustain the universal order, and which are passed on from generation to generation. Thus, they possess the secret of fertility and know how to control sun and rain, a knowledge which they guard jealously because if someone appropriated it, he would, at the same time, appropriate the power to direct the universe; they think, however, that the White Man could never apply these systems, no doubt an allusion to the fact that, without initiation by the *mamas,* one cannot participate in directing the universe.

Devoting himself to the actions necessary to maintain the equilibrium of the universe, man also fulfils, in this way, an interior function, since he "identifies himself" with the exterior world. If harmony reigns on one plane, it will reign on the other; if each one, in his activities and on his own level of possibilities, sees that order and harmony prevail, in himself and in nature, he will have contributed to maintaining the equilibrium of the world and, at the same time, will himself be raised and will draw, spiritually, nearer the summit of the mountain.

Now there must be balance at all levels. On the most easily described plane, that of material life, one learns a lesson that the moderns would do well to heed, namely the duty of man to participate in the order of nature and in the maintenance of its equilibrium. The message which the Muiscas—and, moreover, like them, all the civilisations of the high plateaux of the Andes—reveal to us in this respect is perfectly illustrated by their greatest work: their optimal utilisation and complete preservation of the meagre resources of the regions where they have lived: a message, indeed a warning, for the modern world.

On the temporal plane, we have seen with what wisdom the Muiscas refrained from all dreams of conquest or of extension of their power, avoiding thus all difficulties of a political nature, and assuring the preservation of the values which their country contained and from which the populations which it absorbed could benefit.

Peasants, artisans, merchants and soldiers all followed their calling on the principles which the "book" of nature taught them, and which the *mamas* explained to them. The worship of mountains, rocks, rivers and lakes, to which they devoted themselves from infancy, reminded them constantly of the presence of the Spirit in their life. Perhaps they already dimly perceived the sense of the symbols with which their calling brought them into contact, and perhaps their feelings were touched by the values which the landscape presented.

But to those who "knew" were manifested the truths hidden by the symbols which formed the landscape in the framework of which they lived. In the course of their slow ascent they had learned, in the individual contemplation of the different sacred elements of the landscape, not only to know, but to *feel* their profound sense. Their heart was little by little opened to the beauty which was reflected by the mountain landscape which offered itself to their eyes as a whole, and in proportion as they progressed, they let themselves be enraptured by the harmony and equilibrium of this unity which surrounded them. The landscape had become for them a manifestation, or an image, of the Principle. But as soon as their heart was touched by the beauty which their senses revealed, they identified with what they saw, lost their individuality, and began to dissolve into this landscape. Thus, they attained to the summit as the term of their ascent and then beheld what is to be seen from the summits of the Andes. On the one hand, they dominated the universe which spread beneath them and caused equilibrium to reign there, acting on it without acting, by their mere presence at its centre; on the other hand, they saw a succession of crests and other summits, of which the most distant now appeared, in the transparence of the pure air, unreal, half-dissolved in the radiance of undifferentiated space. During their ascent, the

passing of each crest had allowed them to see the valley which before lay hidden beyond it; they still moved in the world of forms. But for those who had arrived at the summit, the world of forms blurred towards the horizon, and the most distant mountains, which they knew existed, appeared to have vanished already into a formless world. Thus he who is "identified" with the landscape glimpses, beyond it, *That* of which it is the manifestation, but which it hides from *his* mere senses, and which he will only truly see when he is dissolved in its forms, just as they, to his eyes dissolve into the Void from which they arose.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

Pythagoras said that luxury entered into cities in the first place, afterwards satiety, then lascivious insolence, and after all these, destruction.

Stobaeus.