

The Indigenous society of the Kággaba of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta: Preservers of the ancestral knowledge of the “Tayrona” Culture

The Kággaba people

The term Kággaba (also known as Kogi/Kogui) is a self-designation for the people and their culture. Together with the Arhuaco, Wiwa, and Kankuamo peoples, they see themselves as the eldest children of the spiritual mother who gave them the ancestral territory of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (SNSM) or the Sierra Nevada de Gonawindúa, which they care for and protect in accordance with the law of origin *ley de sé*, which is why they see themselves as the custodians of the earth. They see the non-Indigenous world population as their younger siblings. Their cosmology is rooted in the so-called “pre-Columbian” culture known as Tayrona *teyuna*, whose traditions and knowledge they preserve and maintain.

The Kággaba people consist of around 21,000 people who live in 54 settlements in the catchment areas of the rivers Tukurinca, Frío, Mendihiaca, Buritaca, and Don Diego in the department of Magdalena and in the catchment areas of the rivers Palomino, Ancho, Cañas, Garavito, San Miguel, Jerez, Tapias, and Ranchería in the department of Guajira and in the catchment area of the river Guatapuri in the department of Cesar.

The Organización Gonawindúa Tayrona and the Kogui-Malayo-Arhuaco Reserve

The Organización Gonawindúa Tayrona (OGT) is the official institution that represents the Kággaba government vis-à-vis the Colombian state and society in general. It was founded on 7 January 1987, in connection with the principles of origin of the Kággaba, Wiwa, and Arhuaco peoples, on the northern slopes of the SNSM in response to the challenges that existed at the time. The Kogui-Malayo-Arhuaco Reserve was established by Resolution 0109 of 8 October 1980 and is a legally constituted territory by the Colombian government, which is part of the political-administrative structure of the Colombian state.

The ancestral territory *séshizha* and the law of origin *ley de sé*

The ancestral territory of the four peoples of the Kággaba, Arhuaco, Wiwa, and Kankuamo comprises the entire coastal mountain range (with an altitude of almost 6,000 metres) and part of the Caribbean Sea, which is defined by the law of origin *ley de sé* and marked by the *línea negra* (black line), a spiritual and invisible thread. In August 2018, the Colombian state recognised the *línea negra* as the ancestral territory of the four Indigenous peoples of the SNSM through *Decree 1500* and designated it as a protected area. This recognises the spiritual, cultural and ecological heritage of the Indigenous societies of the SNSM and is intended to guarantee their autonomy.

The Black Line is called “*séshizha*” in the Kággaba language, referring to *sé*, the origin, and *shi*, the thread that enables and sustains the existence of the physical world. *séshizha* consists of a network of different zones and sacred places *ezuamas*, which carry certain functions and characteristics and are interconnected, creating a web of connections that allows the territory to be understood as a living body, where the balance depends on its ecological and spiritual management and interconnectivity between all the elements present (water, people, thoughts, plants, mountains, lagoons, animals, stars, stones, sacred objects, sacred sites). The *ezuamas* contain principles and norms for managing the territory and all aspects of life. The *mamas* and *sakas* (spiritual authorities) are responsible for maintaining order and balance by carrying out their spiritual work on the *ezuamas* and establishing and maintaining harmony between the invisible and material world. They nourish and nurture the invisible world, which is

important for the well-being of the material world, not only in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, but on the entire planet.

In the beginning was *aluna sé*, *aluna* is the spirit, the thought and *sé* is the darkness of the origin of the world. Before things reach the material world, they are created in the darkness, in the invisible and the unlimited. This is also where the laws and principles of the origin *ley de sé* come from, on which the immaterial and material order of the entire world is based and which forms the basis for all biodiversity. The SNSM was designated a biosphere reserve by UNESCO back in 1979, and the Kággaba people used the documentary film “From the Heart of the World” (BBC, directed by Alan Ereira, 1990) to send a message to their younger siblings, warning them of the consequences of destroying the environment. They argue in favour of seeing the earth as a living being, whose elements in both the visible and invisible worlds are interconnected and mutually dependent. Their perspective is more relevant than ever and their role as custodians of the world’s equilibrium and bearers of ancestral knowledge makes them important players in the debate on sustainable development and cultural diversity.

Colonial entanglements and the looting of material cultural heritage

With advanced colonisation and the occupation of Santa Marta as the first colonial base in 1525, the Indigenous societies of the region were forced to retreat from the coastal regions to the highlands in order to ensure their survival. In the following five centuries, the subsequent exploration of the SNSM, the excavation and looting of sacred sites, the exploitation of natural resources, illegal plantations, state deprivation, armed violence in Colombia, and mass tourism have dramatically altered the landscape and negatively impacted the ancestral logic of Indigenous interaction with the territory, continuing to threaten not only the ecological balance of the region but also the existence of Indigenous societies. Despite these challenges, the Kággaba have maintained their identity and have become a symbol of resistance against colonial destruction and cultural assimilation. Since then, the Indigenous peoples of the SNSM have been fighting to preserve their cultural identity, their ancestral knowledge and to reclaim their ancestral territory as well as material cultural heritage in order to recover equilibrium.

From the 1920s, excavations of sacred sites began (including Pueblito, Parque Nacional Natural Tayrona, Nahuangue, and Ciudad Perdida), which were systematically looted from the 1970s onwards. Despite existing regulations, in particular the UNESCO Convention of 1970, which was intended to restrict the illegal export of cultural artefacts, the looting of sacred sites and the trade in antiquities is still widespread today. For the Indigenous societies of the SNSM, the translocation of material cultural heritage has caused immense damage, as the principles and laws of the Indigenous societies are violated and the territorial order is disrupted on a material and immaterial level. The sacred “objects” made of clay, stone, gold, and wood (recognised as Tayrona cultural heritage) have been at the centre of Indigenous practices of maintaining equilibrium since the pre-colonial past until today and can no longer fulfil their function through translocation to private and museum collections, which has weakened the societies and the territory.

Despite this, the Kággaba society has been able to preserve its way of thinking and living for centuries. In 2022, the ancestral knowledge system of the Indigenous societies of the SNSM, which has been passed down orally for generations, was included on UNESCO’s *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*.

Recovery of the (im)material cultural heritage

In June 2023, the Ethnological Museum Berlin returned two masks to the Kággaba society from Colombia: Mama Uakai (Sun Mask) and Mama Nuikukui Uakai (Great Sun Mask). These wooden masks from the 15th century were brought to Berlin in 1915 by Konrad Theodor Preuss as part of a

research trip he undertook from 1913 to 1919 as curator of the North American collections at the Berlin Royal Museum of Ethnology. In addition to the masks, three other objects – a staff, a headpiece and a small basket – were handed over as loans to the Kággaba people at COP16 in Cali, Colombia last year, and were officially returned during the visit of Mama José Shibulata Zarabata Sauna and José Manuel Sauna Mamatacan in February 2025 at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin.

Mama José Shibulata Zarabata Sauna and José Manuel Sauna Mamatacan, representing the Organización Gonawindúa Tayrona (OGT), visited museums in German-speaking countries in January/February 2025 (including the Ethnographic Museum of the University Zurich, *Museum der Kulturen Basel*, *Museum Natur und Mensch* in Freiburg, *Abteilung Weltkulturen der Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen* in Mannheim, MARKK Museum am Rothenbaum World Cultures and Arts in Hamburg and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin) to reconnect with collections of their cultural heritage and engage in dialogue about their future. The trip was made possible by the generous support of the DFG Research Training Group “Cultures of Critique”, the Leuphana Institute for Advanced Studies (LIAS) in Culture and Society at Leuphana University in Lüneburg, as well as the *Museum der Kulturen Basel*, the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, the *Museum Natur und Mensch* in Freiburg and the *Abteilung Weltkulturen der Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen* in Mannheim, as well as private donations. The non-profit organisation *delasierra*, based in Switzerland and founded by Laura Felicitas Sabel and Ernesto Coba-Antequera, coordinated and accompanied the trip to the museums. Within the framework of her collaboration with the Organización Gonawindúa Tayrona (OGT) and as a research assistant of the DFG Research Training Group “Cultures of Critique” at Leuphana University, Laura Felicitas Sabel is currently pursuing her doctoral research on the topic of restitution and museum practice, focusing on the collections originating from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

Laura Felicitas Sabel
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