

**“TO THINK IS TO LISTEN”: THE EXPANDED UPSTREAM VIEW OF THE KOGI****MARIANA GOMEZ**

*“If we want to behold nature in a living way, we must follow her example and make ourselves as mobile and flexible as nature herself” (Goethe, 2002 pg.56 in Holdrege, 2013)*

*“Nature left everything organized; we understand nature is like a body, it is a system. We respect the law of nature. The younger brother writes a lot, and thinks like he writes; for us everything is written in nature”  
(Words of a Mamo. Dumingueka, 2012)*

In times when humanity is in search for sensible and harmonic ways of perceiving and engaging our life on the planet, the traditional philosophies have become a point of reference and inspiration. Ethnic groups have come to represent an “ecological” way of living, under a concept we have made applicable to a wide range of actions that sometimes don’t even guarantee the essence of sustainability itself. The “ecological Indian” has become an idealized example of the way we should run our lives in order to be sustainable. But the truth is that it is far deeper and more complex than that. This doesn’t mean that traditional cultures don’t have an ecological way of living, but that their approach to the way they participate in the living systems overruns our concept of sustainability. It is not just an ecological factor that attributes to them this harmonic essence. It is a profound way of engaging the universe that brings together ecological, subsistence, philosophical, spiritual, religious and social factors that we have brought apart.

I have been working with indigenous groups for the past seven years and been able to engage in their philosophies, understanding them with respect to my anthropological background. However, even though this approach has been a great tool, it wasn’t until I started exploring Goethean Science, Henri Bortoft’s ideas on phenomenology and the upstream approach to appearance, that I was able to conceptualize and understand the depth and richness of their way of existing. When working with the Kogi in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta as part of the National Parks Management team, and in the meetings with their political and spiritual authorities, I had the feeling that I understood what they were talking about somewhere in me, but wasn’t completely sure of the real meaning of all that flood of information I was being exposed to. The use of each word in their language is a window to a vast happening that grew greater and deeper each time, and with the concepts defined by Bortoft and Goethean Science I had the sense that I was finally able to grasp that vastness and bring it closer to my experience. It actually helped me notice that I was in fact being part of the happening, as described by phenomenology, when participating in their meetings.

In this paper then, I approach the vastness of the view of the Kogi through the lens provided by Henri Bortoft’s, dynamics of being, in *Taking Appearance Seriously* (2012) and *Goethean Science*, as an opportunity to dwell in a much richer way of existing in life, with perhaps a significance for the western cultures.

This upstream expanded way of existing through perceiving, sensing and communicating holds a deep and wise knowledge about nature (Bortoft 2012), that for our naked narrow eye seems simply as a “sustainable” way of living. And it really is. It results in a sustainable way of living, but has much more to it than just that. It is a multi-dimensional knowledge that holds secrets about the energetic network of connections between our planet and the universe, and the way these movements and relations determine and correlate the existence of all living beings.

The Kogi are an ethnic group that lives in the jungles of a mountain range on the Caribbean Colombian Coast called the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (SNSM). They are an example of people who perceive and interact intensively with the local environment, especially their watersheds. This provides a perfect setting to get a glimpse of this profound wisdom. Western writers like Bortoft (2012) and Holdrege (2013) provide a lens through which in a clear, almost identical way we can approach it in our own terms.

As it may be possible through a part of the whole to have sense of the Whole (Bortoft 2012), each river born in the snow peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (SNSM) is a window to perceiving the whole mountain range, and even the whole Earth. Each pulse, each drop, each element is as much the part and the whole, in the words of the Kogi: “The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is the heart of the world”.

### The Upstream method of the Kogi

The double awareness in the specific qualities of a particular organism and of the environment expressed by that organism described in the upstream vision of Bortoft (2012), is applied by the Kogi and enables them to see the whole in the parts when they approach a specific watershed in their territory. The SNSM is a tropical mountain range, which goes up to around 5,000 meters over sea level, it contains all the possible tropical climates and ecosystems, and is rich in biodiversity and natural resources, so it requires an integral management.



The Kogi, aware of their mission to protect the heart of the world and maintain the equilibrium of the universe, do not engage with “object thinking” of the western culture, as described by Holdrege (2013) in *Thinking Like a Plant*, where one takes for granted that nature consists of physical “things” that interact on the basis of impersonal physical laws. Therefore, the “younger brother”, as the Kogi have called us, has the perspective of our intelligence as an instrument that enables us to grasp, control and manipulate nature. Nature then becomes an abstraction, something external in which we don’t really participate. They, on the other hand, practice what Holdrege (2013) has called “living thinking”, a participatory way of knowing that transcends the dichotomies of man-nature, subject-object or mind-matter, a transformative and living way of relating with the world.

By communicating with the spirits of each of the beings in their surroundings, the Kogi participate in a dialogue with matter and meaning at the same time, in which they strive to learn what the phenomenon has to tell them (Holdrege, 2013), just as done in Goethean Science when described by Holdrege and Bortoft (2012). Their participation, a fundamental quality of human embeddedness in the World, is expressed by pagamentos or blessings done in specific energetic points around their territory with sea shells taken from the shores to the highland lakes, and small stones from the highlands to the lowlands. This open-ended dynamic dialogue (Holdrege 2013) with the world in thoughts and actions reveals the living qualities of the world they inhabit and is enhanced by the constant meditation done by chewing a mixture of toasted coca leaves with shell powder calcium, which they carry in a gourd that represents their mindfulness.

The Goethean Science process, which requires a plant sensitive (or watershed in this case) way of formulating its relationship with the environment, to get immersed in the phenomena, and fully participate to allow patterns of order to emerge from the chaos, and the meaning of the differences to reveal themselves (Holdrege 2013, pg.105); is expanded by the Kogi to a telepathic state of communication and participation. Aluna is the term used to refer to the state of mind, body and soul that opens when communicating with beings or elements that are not only non-human, but not necessarily physically in the same place and time.

When “in Aluna” the Kogi are able to envision the interdependence and correlation of relationships between all the existing beings, by perceiving the network in which Bortoft (2012) has explained the meaning of, the whole is revealed and materialized in the identity of each of the parts as self-differencing elements of a dynamic unity.

The personification of natural beings with human qualities through spiritual mothers and fathers, Jaba and Jate, opens a dialogue with the natural world, which attributes intelligence and conscience to “things” that for the western younger brother appear as inanimate and external. A living interaction in conversation with the environment is held by the Kogi as vivid parts of the whole, as well as between every other existing being in the material world and the spiritual realm. Each organism is then a teacher of “living thinking” (Holdrege 2013 pg.118) or “pensar bonito: beautiful thinking”, a term used by them to refer to the power of thoughts, meaning that whatever is thought by us is materialized somewhere in some form and will affect the equilibrium of the system. With this self-awareness they acknowledge the activity of human knowing as part of the ecology of the earth (Holdrege 2013, pg. 122), and recognize the depth of our participation in nature. This whispers the “impact” and imbalance our thoughts and actions can cause as well.

The Kogi believe that we humans are able to choose how we shape this engagement. It is the reason why they believe that we have caused “sickness” by creating interference with the energetic network of the universe and breaking the equilibrium, but they also recognize the plasticity of the human mind, and are kin to deliver us a message that will stimulate our growth as “knowers”, who hold the potential to sense the whispers of nature; an upstream approach in H. Bortoft’s terms. The more we know, the more the limitless nature of the world becomes apparent and finds expression through us. They insist that we still have to learn to listen, to be able to let the others speak through us, like they do when they speak to the father and mother spirits of each place, element or being, Jaba and Jate, and empower the active participant potential within us. To think is to listen...



### **Sensing Watersheds**

The capacity of the “parts” of nature to respond flexibly to the different environments and conditions is an expression of the organism’s openness to it, which gives it the ability to modify itself and develop in relation to those conditions. This definition is used by Bortoft (2012) to refer to the self-differencing quality of a being, like the river that flows through the landscape taking its shape. The river forms itself by informing itself with

the environment that supports it (Holdrege 2013, pg.115). Watersheds, flexible enough to actively adapt to the environment in their path from the snow peaks to the ocean, are like whisperers to the Kogi, and reveal the world it has passed through to them.

For the Kogi, “the river is like a person, upstream it is like a child, in the middle it is an adult, when it reaches the ocean it is an elder, and then it comes back up when it dies, to rest in the snow peaks and be born again” (Mamo Rogelio, 2012). The world carries an imprint of the water that has run through every item of the living network (Bortoft 2012), and the water reciprocally carries the world it has run through, making it possible to have a sense of the whole going into the parts. This dynamic movement makes the watershed a piece of a hologram (Bortoft 2012) that reveals the whole as something endless. This expanded science practiced by the Kogi offers a shift of focus within experience, away from what is experienced into the experiencing of it, the happening of the interaction (Bortoft 2012), of the communication, of the connection, of the existing.

The experiencing of the phenomenon described by Bortoft (2012) as going upstream towards the happening is embedded by the Kogi when approaching a watershed, not only because they are experiencing the experience itself, but because they not only approach the water by its fluidity downstream, or literally downhill, but the water as in a circular motion as well. As described above, the river follows the development process of a human being that dies and is reborn, referring to the evaporation process described by mainstream science and personifying the cycle in the experience of dialogue with all the participants. This way, they are concerned not only about what happens in the upper part of the mountain and the consequences it will have in the estuaries and coastal areas, but worry about the way these last are “managed” because they identify a direct correlation with the state of the highland lakes, which determine the continuity of the water cycle.

As described by Bortoft (2012), it is the togetherness, which determines the belonging, where things already belong with one another and this belongingness determines their togetherness. As participants of existence, they understand the importance to listen and not to impose a framework (Bortoft 2012), for how they say, nature is already organized, it follows sacred patterns that must not be disturbed. These patterns are “laws” that derive from the great Ley Sé or Sé Law. This law contains the principles and fundamental norms of the Original Law that holds the essence, the meaning of existence. “Sé is the passage from the darkness to light, it is the boundary between the spiritual and matter” (OGT 2006). “It establishes the SNSM as an indissoluble unit between the matter of itself and the spirit that animates it, and it manifests itself in the way that all the communities of beings that inhabit it reproduce it in the social structure, culture, way of using her, and in the way we celebrate the cycles of life” they say (OGT 2006).

This law maps a network of interconnections between energetic vortices, which allow a dynamic distinction by the coming-into-being of each participant to occur, a distinguishing in a dual movement of thinking which goes in opposite directions at once: in one direction it differences, whereas in the other direction it relates (Bortoft 2012, pg. 22). These energetic vortex points are called ezwamas, which determine the reason for being of the SNSM and connects its purpose to the open universe. Their connection to these points by walking while meditating their territory, and the pagamento offerings, takes them to endow what McGilchrist (in Bortoft 2012 pg.25) described as “the world calling forth something in me that in turn calls forth something in the world”, in a reciprocal dance between them and the natural world, between meaning and existence. “There is no world without thought”, because it is precisely our thoughts which bring forward the happening of the meaning, of the whole. And this is only possible if we go upstream from appearance to appearance (Bortoft 2012).

For the case of the Santa Clara River, Mamalwa is the “owner” of it all. Everything that exists was contained within itself, until Jate Muldkwakukwi, the sun, organized all the species and beings throughout the watershed. Mamalwa is who organizes all the species and their interactions, and “holds” diversity. The integral design of the territory is based on the ezwamas, which have a spiritual being responsible for their health, either a Jaba (mother) or a Jate (father). Each Jate at the same time has a Jaba or mother, to which it is required to ask for permission to enter, walk, use, and inhabit. In the case of the sun, Jate Muldkwakulwi, Mamalwa’s spiritual mother Jaba Zawe Zhu opens access to other Spiritual Mothers, like the Jaba of crops, birds, clouds, cotton and coca plants. When the “job” of speaking to these spiritual beings in each of the sacred sites or ezwamas is done, they are activating one of the principal powers of ritual: the offerings or pagamentos (OGT 2006). By these, it is possible to identify what actions have to be taken forward for the management of the territory, when to crop and where, and other decisions that can’t be taken by human beings on their own, but with the participation of all the other beings that inhabit the meaning, the Great Mystery of existence, in the form of matter. The Kogi use the answers received by these voices to take social, political and economic decisions, and

make agreements about ecological calendars with all the Kogi community as well as with the larger community of beings that inhabit the SNSM.

These relationships and stories of interaction between the spiritual fathers and mothers determine the character that the watershed occupies within the SNSM. It is a place for the conservation of the different seeds that make the mountain flourish, what determines the diversity of forests. This way, the Kogi are also able to “categorize” the different types of forests, the self-differencing unfolding of the forest, as it is put by Bortoft (2012 p. ) when referring to the organs of a plant. The relationships and interconnections with others and with the river, gives this watershed a nourishing function of wellbeing for the people. These Goethean Science engagements with the natural world connect the Kogi with the movement of the planet in order to activate the cycle of the ancestral organization of the territory. This is associated to a healing process related to the protection of biodiversity ecosystems, and people, and their interrelation, an integral view that includes human beings as part of the living system.

### **An Integral Approach**

The vision the Kogi inhabit accepts there is a knowledge in the voice of nature that goes beyond them, which is extemporal in the sense that it is independent of the historical moment of the group. The meaning of the voice of Aluna is the time itself; it is a meaning that redefines itself infinitely every time that a phenomenon is expressed (phenomenology in Bortoft, 2012), inhabiting the power of time, transformation, self-differentiation and ‘re- significance’ through its expression. The dialogue that Kogi sustain with this voice inhabits the idea that “nature has psychic qualities, so as well as being material, there is something mind-like in nature which is its active principle” (Bortoft 2012, pg.45). This opens the door to rediscover living nature, something the Kogi do every time they approach a natural spirit to consult their actions and confirm their intuitions through their sensing body in order to understand the profound meaning of our relationship with the natural environment and to be guided and in consent with this active principle. This way nature comes to presence through the experience of the senses (Bortoft 2012) in an expanded Goethean Science.

The Kogi’s successful method of engaging with nature is therefore able to avoid adding anything which is not there in the phenomenon, and at the same time not leaving anything out (Bortoft 2012), by going into the phenomenon itself and bringing it to themselves in the action. This participation guarantees the precision of the intuition of the wholeness in the decisions taken by these people, and therefore gives their way of living a sustainable quality. A river is a movement, a dynamic whole that the Kogi inhabit by experiencing its metamorphic qualities. This dynamic whole is a movement of differencing which produces multiplicity in unity, and at the same time holds diversity within unity (Bortoft 2012), and the Kogi are able to understand this from their intuitive intelligence by embracing difference in the midst of sameness the same way Bortoft (2012) has described an upstream engagement with existence. In the watershed they see diversity in dynamic unity, and this is a gateway to the meaning of the Whole.

This upstream movement of intuiting, knowing, experiencing and communicating with the river results in a deep ecological understanding of a natural phenomenon that is so “natural” that it seems as if our culture has forgotten it. The water cycle, which has its origin at the top of the snow peak and runs down the slope, filling the landscape with life and feeding other water resources in an interconnected network, gives itself to the ocean to die and be reborn by evaporation as rain at the top of the mountain again. This self-differencing without fragmenting the unity allows them to sense “the earth like a body. We have to protect the blood, which is the water first. The spine is the snow peaks and the mangroves, all these are sacred sites. We don’t understand places like hills, rivers or rocks, as Sacred Sites, are connected to the rest of the territory, like the organs in a body”.

The SNSM is the origin, the starting point and the centre of the world, which is clustered in concentric circles around her. The SNSM is thought and reality, and the principal task of her existence is to take care and guard the system, for her to continue existing this way. For this, we shall “pay” and “work” traditionally because all that we obtain from nature creates an “unbalance”, therefore our thoughts and actions should search for the maintenance of the equilibrium and harmony between human beings and nature” (OGT 2006). This way, participating in the existence of the SNSM and the world as a whole, allows the Kogi to see the diversity of the phenomenon unfolding as the living unity of its coming-into-being (Bortoft 2012), and therefore to be the happening of the phenomenon itself. They embody a doorway through which the past can come to life for them in the present (Bortoft 2012), the timeless understanding of the traditional knowledge, which is the voice of nature, the meaning of the Whole.

The lens of H. Bortoft’s description of phenomenology, upstream participation, and the sensing of Goethean Science, open possible windows towards considering the coming-into-being, which is endemic in the Kogi philosophy, in Western cultures. Academic approaches towards indigenous cultures and the views of the Kogi as a “sustainable” way of living which appear as something distant we won’t be able to commit to, draw our ways of engaging with existence even farther away, setting us off in a stranded journey downstream. When bringing phenomenology and Goethean Science close to traditional knowledge and Kogi philosophies, I was able to sense a hope of change within our society with an upstream view in our daily life. When we look at the Kogi ways of thinking as a cognition that can be considered as something universal, rather than an exclusive and exquisite way of approaching life in an “isolated” tribal group, these become graspable and applicable. As the elders say, we are here to “remember”.

If Henri Bortoft, Goethe, Holdrege and other members of Western culture have been able to remember without even being aware of the existence of the Kogi people, we all have the potential to “remember” and go upstream.

*“No estar, sino ser el movimiento”*  
*Canción: Bailar en la cueva*  
*Jorge Drexler*



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