

# Kággaba: Media, People in Community Life and Masks

## The Story of the Indigenous Communities in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta

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### ABSTRACT

This document presents a brief description of an arts-based research to outline the research topics, the methodology of the research, the possibilities of displaying and presenting the Kággaba community by using digital media, and the creative process of an art artifact that is an inseparable part of the research.

### CCS CONCEPTS

• Applied computing • Arts and humanities • Media arts

### KEYWORDS

Digital Media Art, Photography, Research, Methodology, Artifact, A/r/tography, Diário de Bordo, Kággaba, Masks, Communication.

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## 1 Introduction

The theme of this research project is the Kággaba community (also known as Kogi or Kogui) that is considered to be the most complete surviving civilization of pre-Columbian America (Ereira, 2008) because it has not significantly changed for the centuries as the members of the community escaped to the mountains after the Spaniards sailed to the shores of northern Colombia for the first time in the history. Since then Kággaba keeps their traditional way of living based on the respect to the nature and the wisdom of their ancestors (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1991). Considering the historical and contemporary context in which not only the Kággaba culture, but also the other three native communities in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta are surrounded, I find very interesting

to look for the intersection between traditional and contemporary, analog and digital, abstract and material, because all these contrasts could be used to characterize this theme which seems to be spread out in time and space.

### 1.1 Question

At the beginning of this research rose the question: In what ways can I, as a photographer and an artist, depict the indigenous cultures in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta to tell their story to a wider audience?

### 1.2 Theme

Kággaba is a culture that has been always perceived from more scientific perspective, and these tendencies persist to this day. It is a culture that is still perceived as exotic and therefore a common viewer keeps a distance from it. It is one of the last cultures that still preserves its independence and full functionality and maintains living in harmony. The people of the community respect natural human values and dignity, which, in my opinion, have almost disappeared from Western civilization. Because the way in which the culture was depicted by ethnographers in the past and based on historical events connected with colonialism, the view of it seems to be one-way oriented and in many cases, according to the opinion of the people from this community, inaccurate. This culture can be a great inspiration for many people and as an example help to understand and solve the problems that our civilization is facing, especially regarding the problems related to the environment and to our interpersonal relations. Kággaba has also attracted interest in cultural heritage issues in recent years and the territory of the native communities inhabiting the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta was included in the Unesco list at the end of 2022. On the other hand it is also related to a historical controversy concretely to their ritual objects that had been taken from the community and placed in several museums around the world from the time of colonialism. Two sacred Kággaba masks, which were acquired under unclear circumstances by a German ethnologist Preuss and placed in the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin, are a big topic of controversy. The masks, which are crucial to the Kággaba community as a means of communication with their ancestors, will also be part of the research and an art artifact inspired by the masks will be created during the research. I will look at the topic of the masks from wider perspective, for

instance using a mask as a medium or a guide for my artwork or a tool of personal transformation and communication.

## 2 Research

In order for the topic to be thoroughly explored, I am going to start with the creators, artists and scientists from the past who have already worked on this topic in other parts of the world, for example in Amazonia, and asking the questions: What experience did they have? What do their works depict? What media did they use? Where did they publish or present their work? The answers should help me to find the connection to justify that I am doing something different. I can justify it by for instance that I am working with another culture, in another part of the world, using another media or visual language to summarize what I am doing differently. It is generally considered not enough just to tell the story of other people what they have done but to relate what they have done to what I want to do. It is important to develop an idea of narratives, how to tell the story nowadays and how to create a narrative about something from the past but surviving until the present.

The research therefore should have three parts:

1. Visual anthropology connected to the native communities and rituals to explain the images and what the visual part of the culture is. The question of the use of photography should be explored as well.
2. Digital storytelling to describe what kind of media have been used by the other authors and what media I am going to use to tell the story (photos, graphics, masks, sounds, videos).
3. The digital artifact I am creating and that is a part of the research, its development and the process of creation.

The goal of this research and the artifact is to create an imaginary bridge as a dialogue between historical and contemporary, between new digital media and analog media. As a photographer, I constantly ask myself the question, how to tell the story of these communities, from which angles, positions and perspectives – from a perspective of a scientist, a documentarian, a portraitist or an artist? Which concepts and media shall I use? Which artists used this theme in their works? How will the meaning of what is displayed change as a result (Berger, 2009, p. 45)? How is the meaning of photography changing by being put in different context? How does the image speak and what are the possibilities of digital media to tell the story? How the way of presentation as a means of communication can be included and in which way?

### 2.1 Arts-based research

What is typical for arts-based research is not the discovery of reality and the search for answers in already existing reality,

but systematic questioning during the creative process and artistic creation, and thus the creation of a new understanding of reality (Veiga, 2019, p. 1). The methodology of a/r/cography, which is often used in the arts-based research, and will be used in this research as well, includes three main activities: doing, thinking and exploring and sharing, whereby sharing is considered the way in which the artist conveys the result of his research to the audience and how the created artistic artifact communicates with the audience (Veiga, 2019, p. 2).

The starting point for my work while working on the arts-based research is that it is important to examine the already existing reality to take the work (of this topic) a step further and therefore ascertaining its own originality, but also to further explore variations, alternatives, detours that may contribute to refine, enrich and enhance the project (Veiga, 2019, p. 7). To know with what intentions artists and scientists, workers, travelers and missionaries, took photographs of native cultures around the world and told their story. Here it would be good to explore and get to know already used perspectives and examples related to the topic of native cultures through already existing works and "to climb onto the shoulders of a giant, at least one of modest height, or even onto another dwarf" (Eco, 2015, p. 16).

For this research, I also want to take into consideration the way of narration by the native cultures themselves. It is becoming more and more common that younger members of the community already own smartphones and use their profiles on social networks to share their stories, life and culture. Although the external conditions in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains, such as the absence of electricity, make creation more difficult, they also express themselves artistically using various digital applications, and some of them actively create works of art with the theme of their culture.

My own previous early work can contribute to the creative process and offer tools and methods of creation that are close to me and with which I like to work. Because I assume that if some procedures already exist, they can serve as a source of inspiration. Undoubtedly, these include collecting of visual material during the longer period of time, conceptual work, narrative and documentary work, collage, contrasts, personal matters, traditional techniques and visual language oscillating between photography and painting.

### 2.2 Ethnography

Due to the selected topic, the combination of a/r/cography and ethnography is suggested itself. The technique of ethnography has been widely used within visual anthropology in photography and film from the very first beginning,

especially when recording exotic locations and native communities. Visual anthropology also contains the question how visual culture influences and shapes our identities and drives aspects of the global economy (Smith, 2021). It has been widely used to document cultures that were rapidly changing or being destroyed by the expansion of Euro-American colonial power and the processes of industrialization. This is how, for example, the large-scale portrait of native North American communities by Edward S. Curtis was created (Curtis, 2015).

In my anthropological investigations, I have used terms such as "encounter with the foreigner", "dialogue with the stranger" or "observing the unexplored". There is no doubt that the unknown is more powerful than the familiar and it is not by chance that the relationship between the familiar and the strange, the classic scenario of ethnographic research, ends up transforming over time into much more complex than those marked by mere differences. These, at first very clear, end up interpenetrating reciprocally and the differential characteristics can even be reversed. (Canevacci, 2021, p. 2).

### 3 Media

If computer media has influenced the communication, acquisition, manipulation, storage and distribution of media (Manovich, 2001, p. 19), how does this affect the content and form of creation and an art artifact? What role do used media play in artistic creation? What does the author bring to the art artifact? What are the intentions of creating such an artwork? How is the artwork shared? The whole story about the native communities of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in this research started at social media by creating connections between two different worlds and by sharing the photographs that had been already taken among their communities. It includes the stories of friendships and relationships where the starting point was the social media Instagram and Facebook. This is part of the story. What kind of life did social media create in the last decade? How do people live with them and how do they integrate one with the other?

#### 3.1 Photography and memory

Confession *I am* is given time to reflect on its past and anticipate its future; the time of exposure does not act violently towards the time of this *I am*, on the contrary - we get a special feeling that the time of exposure *is* the time of a whole life. (Berger, 2009, p. 62).

Due to the history of visual anthropology and its use, at the beginning the creators of the films authentically recorded the

subject in such a way that the creator gave the viewer the feeling that he was physically present, without influencing the observed scene (Smith, 2021).

But photography is not only an interpretation of reality, but also its imprint, something that was immediately redrawn from reality – like a footprint or a posthumous mask. Visual perception is a much more complex and selective process in human mind than the process that creates a record on a film material. (Berger, 2009, p. 66).

Berger works with the thoughts of Sonntag in the essay *About Looking*, in which he reflects on the use of photography tautologically as a repetition of what is said in words at the same time (Berger, 2009, p. 79) and also questions the meaning of the photographic record as a substitute for memory. Since memory does not work on a one-way principle, but associatively spreads in all directions, in a similar way, photography should be included in the context of experience, social experience and social memory. If our mind does not work linearly, but spreads in all directions in a radial manner (Berger, 2009, p. 79) it is also possible to approach photography as a medium by using self-reflection, communication with the audience, with the research subject and with other artists (Veiga, 2019, p. 3).

This is particularly suitable for digital art, as the possibility of alteration is far more inviting and non-destructive, unlike with painting or sculpture since multiple generations – or versions – of the same artwork can coexist with only incremental effort, therefore also reinforcing the rhizome metaphor. (Veiga, 2019, p. 3).

It is also necessary to think about the function and meaning of photography. The creators of ethnographic films were also aware of this. Perhaps that is why it became commonplace that visual film anthropology began to use the subject to co-create the scene and participate in the script. This stemmed from the opinion that the influence of the creator and the tool on the creation of a work of art cannot be neglected (Smith, 2021).

#### 3.2 Masks and medium

Mask can be used as a symbol or a tool through which I can invite people on this journey around the world of Kággaba the same way I am using a camera to capture the pictures. The mask here serves as a metaphor. A mask can be interpreted as a layout, template, map, print just like WhatsApp conversations or presentations on social media. However it serves as a cover as well. We all wear masks - a pretence. Social media create a virtual reality. How do we wear masks?

These media leave an imprint in the virtual world of the Internet and they function according to the already given templates. A mask as in Kággaba cosmology serves as a teleporter. The highest spiritual leaders wear them during the special ceremonies to travel to different places and time to connect with their ancestors. The mask can represent a net that connects with the spirits of the immaterial world, with the past and the future.

## 4 Artifact

### 4.1 Concept

The concept is based on transforming Kággaba cosmology into materiality that will be represented by the artifact. The artifact represents space in which the story of Kággaba will be told. But the viewer will be slowly revealing the story of Kággaba as well as the artist of this project will reveal a path how to tell and share the Kággaba story and how it will be transformed into the artifact.

### 4.2 Implementation

By artifact I mean a smaller dark room that represents the Kággaba world, the cosmos, the universe. When we talk about the darkroom, we talk about the place where the analog photographs are developed or an interior of a camera where the film is exposed. According to Kággaba, everything comes from darkness. The Mamos spend their first thirty years in the cave and then come out and see all that they have been taught about before. They are thought to see the world through eyes other than physical ones. As a part of the installation there can be the sound of the sea in the room, which represents the woman – the Mother from whom everything is born, or the sound of the river can be heard as a backdrop. Every element of water symbolizes a woman, and thus the creator of all life on the Earth.

In the room, the projection of the film on the walls will be presented. The film starts in a dark forest with a Kággaba man wearing his typical white dress. He takes the viewer on a journey – a walk through a dark forest. When I was in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, one night I had a dream. I was walking through the dark forest and the people of Kággaba accompanied me. I clearly saw the twisted and thick roots of the tree across the path forming a kind of staircase upwards. In the background, the green mixed with the blackness of the night shone through the trees, like an impenetrable and dense painting on canvas. The presented film begins at night, as Kággaba man waits for the viewer to take him to the sacred mountain of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Later more men and women appear from the forest and this creates a feeling of harmony and community. Then the movement of the film stops the walk through the forest and dawn begins to

break. The scenery changes and the village of Kággaba will emerge from the darkness.

The passage from darkness to light is the passage from the spiritual to the material. (Chaparro, 2021).

As we go through the forest, a projection of the faces of the Kággaba ancestors will appear in the forest. This projection will be composed of photographs of a whole family, which will blend with each other, and finally one shape will be generated from them as a mask.

Masks will be installed on the sides as museum artifacts, illuminated by spotlights and covered with a white cloth, the kind used to cover things during apartment renovations, so that no one is allowed to look at them. The Kággaba people say that their masks currently placed in museums must not be displayed as exhibition artifacts in a museum because they absorb the toxicity of the museum visitors. The space of the artifacts in the dark room will be guarded by a laser security system that will start a piercing sound if someone tries to lift the cover and look at the masks. This is meant to symbolize secrets that should never be revealed, and at the same time represents the respect for sacred objects. For Kággaba, the topic of the masks is very special and little talked about. We know that the Kággaba people never invite outsiders to their community rituals and ceremonies. It is also not allowed to photograph such events, and little is said about them. I decided to respect this rule and use the theme of the masks as a template for developing thoughts about media and narrative. But I will not show them directly as an artifact. Although I used to have an idea that the viewer would be able to put on the mask, I decided to completely exclude this possibility of interactivity after consideration.

Generally speaking, for me native cultures have always been shrouded in mystery and mysticism. If we look back in the history to the time of the colonialism, it can be assumed that these impressions always accompanied the native communities. Nowadays, the native cultures still have a touch of exoticism and attract a lot of attention, especially for people in a search for an alternative way of living, because with their way of life closely connected with nature, are way beyond the western style of life and thinking. Therefore, getting to know these communities from a human point of view is essential for me. This project was created on the basis of communication with people from native communities through chats and social media. Through some kind of diary, which contains conversations carried out during the entire process of working on the project, I would like to present the human dimension of these cultures, to show that they too think about the same things as we do.

## 5 Digital journal - Diário de Bordo (DDB)

The whole process of the research and creation of the artifact will be recorded in various multimedia forms and it will be published continuously on the Internet in an interactive form of digital journal called Diário de Bordo (DDB) that is described by Veiga as a living and evolving record of intentions, processes, thoughts, initial inspirations, developments, (self)brainstormings, lines of research, tests, errors, achievements, dialogues and public interventions (Veiga, 2021, p.20). The aim is to create a continuous interaction with the subject and with the audience and to extend the information about the topic including the background of the project that will transform into a large artwork itself. It will also serve as a platform where the prototype of the artifact will be presented within its development.

The DDB must, therefore, assume itself as an important instrument in the construction of this "creative literacy", linked to digital media art, emphasizing not only the creative and research processes, but also the analytical and critical processes, encompassing the relationship of the artifact and the research associated with it with the respective audiences. (Veiga, 2021, p. 20).

A discussion forum can be located here, where the audience can ask questions directly to the people of the Kággaba community, and it is also a place where, in a playful way through an interactive game, people can learn to do the so-called traditional work, which consists of purifying the spirit and is normally performed by people in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Digital journal (DDB) is considered to be an integral part of the a/r/cography research method (Veiga, 2012, p. 19) and its character resonates with the way our mind and memory develop. If we look for a similarity further, we will find it in the topic itself. Recording, sorting and selecting ideas and thoughts is the essential attitude to the mind on which the people from the Kággaba community function. Although the entries will be recorded chronologically, they will be organized by hashtags and therefore the journal can be navigated over time. Records that relate to one topic will then be possible thanks to the chronology read as a process and to perceive the development of a specific field of the research. The records will include the following items:

1. The recording of internal information, generated by the author, as described above, including short texts, schemes, sketches, photographs, reactions, meditations and self-criticism.

2. The recording of external information, such as bibliography, reference projects, links to videos and other multimedia elements and external websites.
3. The recording of external interactions with other agents, such as dialogues, surveys, public presentations, interviews, formal and informal, with close friends and family, teachers, students, colleagues and the public. (Veiga, 2021, p. 20).

## 6 Evaluation

The possibilities of how to tell the story about native communities will be evaluated continuously. Several conversations should be held with the Mamos and this topic should be discussed from a spiritual point of view and how it fits with the cosmology of Kággaba. Continuous evaluation of the work with the Mamos should become part of the research, so that there is no distortion of understanding and the ethical and moral needs of the participants are preserved. There should be also evaluated beneficial directions of the research especially those that are closely related to digital media and not to confuse them with topics that are tempting for anthropological research. And the feedback of the audience will be evaluated, which will be continuously collected during the entire process of creation through the online platform, but also after the implementation of the installation.

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