

The *Mamas* and the *Papas*: Goddess Worship, the Kogi Indians, and Ecofeminism

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Ecofeminism illuminates the strong cultural connection between sexist denigration of women and denigration of the material world, especially of the planet Earth, often figured as Mother Nature. This kind of investigation has gained a good deal of support and interest recently, among both intellectuals and activists, though individuals differ in their interpretation of just what that cultural connection reveals. For some, the question is one of initial cause and effect: Did denigration of nature lead to denigration of women or vice versa? For others, the question tends less toward linear causality, suggesting instead an opportunity for examining how the concept of "otherness" functions. Ecofeminism often serves a descriptive purpose, providing a way to point to the end-of-the-millennium convergence of violence: physical and political violence against women and feminists, ecological violence against the integrity of the Earth's ecosystems, economic violence against the poor. These perspectives are extremely helpful in examining the results of Western culture's failure to extend its concept of an ethical "us" beyond a limited group—family, tribe, or nation.

Ecofeminism does not, however, remain a primarily descriptive theory, explaining how we have come to these crises. Instead, many ecofeminists intend their descriptive framework to directly serve an argumentative purpose, to present an intellectual or political—or, interestingly, spiritual—program for change. Ecofeminism, then, offers a form of corrective didacticism, where the masculinist-antiecological model is examined and then rejected for a different paradigm. Feminist-ecological, I would quickly agree, would certainly be preferable, but matriarchal-ecological is more nearly the opposite of the specifically patriarchal/antiecological worldview that many ecofeminists accurately delineate as our Western inheritance.

Throughout the environmental community, one hears a note of urgency, sometimes bordering on panic: Have the Western forces that have swept industrialism across the planet crested in today's global markets—and is it already too late to reverse the resultant environmental destruction? From ozone depletion to desertification to greenhouse effect to population growth to rates of species extinction to nuclear waste—the list of crises can be numbing. And so the desire is very strong for a transformational approach not only to the present environmental problems but even

to the cultural attitudes and prospects that led to those problems. Eco-feminist analysis and critique of the status quo alone cannot reverse worldwide socioecological crisis.

However, I have some grave misgivings about the advisability of proposing a matriarchal corrective for the patriarchy. My concerns extend beyond the recognition, already voiced by others, that perpetuation of stereotyped gender roles in goddess or earth-mother imagery actually reinforces Western patriarchal sex typing. The contemporary longing for a primitive/natural relationship with the earth finds expression in both popular culture and scholarly discussion, realms of knowledge that share certain blind spots and assumptions regarding self, sex, and saving the planet. In this essay, I wish to explore these issues by way of an examination of a recent, didactic examination of ecology and cosmology, Alan Ereira's BBC documentary *From the Heart of the World: The Older Brothers' Warning* (1992) and his book-length account of his experiences in Colombia during the filming, titled *The Elder Brothers*.¹ Though the film aired on PBS and the book was published by a major commercial firm, these two productions can illustrate the way intellectual and popular approaches to environmental issues often fail to grasp the ultimate environmental effects of our stories of cosmology. Let me first discuss Ereira's works, and then examine how they may illuminate the dialogue on ecofeminism, particularly calls for a return to matriarchal spiritualities. I will conclude with my own suggested paradigm, one that will seek to escape and correct the misogyny and environmental destruction that ecofeminists correctly identify as our inheritance, but without relying on essentialist definitions of gender.

Both Ereira's book and his film are narratives of cultural and ecological instruction, briefly introducing us to the Kogi, a tribal people who live high in the Sierra Nevada mountains of Colombia, and delivering an ecological warning to the global industrial and postindustrial societies: the world is coming to an end because the Mother, the Earth, is being killed.

Ereira's documentary features the high priests of Colombia's Kogi Indians, the *mamas*; these men are the primary narrators (speaking through a translator) for the documentary. The Kogi *mamas* have little regard for Westerners, whom they call the "younger brothers," and do not desire contact with them, but as Ereira describes, they are concerned that the world may soon end owing to Western society's rapacious use of technology to plunder the earth. The *mamas* describe their cosmology while the cameras roll, in order that "younger brother" might see the necessity of changing "his" ways, before it is too late and the world is killed, literally dismembered by industrial technology.

According to Kogi cosmology, the Mother is both the physical world

and the intelligence that shaped it—though gendered female and embodying the principle of procreativity, the Mother is a goddess who is not merely material immanence but also mind, intellect, creativity. Ereira's documentary describes, in the voices of the Kogi and their translator, how the world was made, emphasizing how much thought was involved before the Mother became fertile and was able to create the Earth, the cosmos, and human beings.

Significantly, the Kogi mythology does not appear to follow the Western tendency toward a dualistic separation of male intellect from female materiality. Indeed, as anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff explains elsewhere, the Kogi believe that "objects or phenomena contain a mass of condensed information, a wealth of associations and meanings" ("Loom of Life" 9), so that their material culture represents "a storehouse of detailed codes that are linked into interrelated concepts" and that "'speak' to the beholder" (10). The material and intellectual realms appear, in this regard, inseparable; thoughtful creativity and biological procreativity are closely connected.

It was the Mother herself who gave human beings one of the more important forms of their material culture, weaving. Though Ereira notes that Kogi men go to the *nuhue*, or "world-house," to engage in political or theological discussions—much of the cosmological lecture the *mamas* delivered was recorded there—it is Reichel-Dolmatoff who explains further the symbolic significance of the building. All weaving is done at the *nuhue*, and Kogi men regard weaving as a moral activity, reflective of their inner life. Just as women are excluded from the *nuhue*, women may not weave, according to custom. The *nuhue* itself is a metaphoric loom, with four major hearth sites that structure the interior in a way that resembles the rectangular shape of a loom. And the building is a form of celestial calendar; at the times of the solstices, when a small hole in the roof is uncovered, the sun traces a course of light across the floor. The Kogi explain that the sun is weaving, and the bright sunlight is analogous to the white yarn used in Kogi dress—yarn is said to be "the thought of the sun" ("Loom of Life" 13–14).

The Kogi explain that weaving is a balance of male and female forces: the warp is female and the shuttle is male. The Earth itself, they say, is an immense loom on which the sun, through the patterns of the solstices and equinoxes, weaves the Fabric of Life, thus connecting clothing, as material and as symbol, with the ritual rhythms of their agricultural society. According to the Kogi, nature and culture are inseparable.

What I find most striking in all this is the importance embedded within the Kogi's mythology of the Mother as not merely a progenitor figure but an intellectual one, who gives not only life but also culture. However, this rich female contribution appears only in the oral heritage from the past; it seems not to inform the Kogi's present cultural norms.

Not until fourteen minutes into the documentary, or seventy six pages into the book, does the viewer/reader learn that *mama* is a word direct from the Kogi's own language, meaning "sun" or by extension, "light" or "enlightened." For quite some time, then, readers and viewers might well assume, as I did, that *mamas* is an imported Western word describing the priests as metaphoric mothers. After all, both texts employ the singular *mama* and plural *mamas*, using the familiar addition of an *s* to denote number.

Yet even with the linguistic irony removed, both of Ereira's narratives almost completely exclude women. Only one woman speaks in the documentary, in a brief segment describing family life and the roles women play in agriculture; after a scene in which a young woman plants crops, she faces the camera and describes how children are taken to the *mamas* to be healed when they are sick, and how when the children are not healed, they die and the people mourn them. In the book, Ereira says that women can become *mamas* but that their priestly activities are limited, since they cannot enter the *nuhue* (52). Not one of the handful of *mamas* included in the documentary, however, is a woman, and the book only briefly recounts Ereira meeting one. The spiritual life of the Kogi, therefore, is presented as a matrifocal cosmology administered by a present-day patriarchy.

Much attention in both narratives is dedicated to the initiation process required of *mamas*. Each candidate, often chosen through divination, is entrusted to a *mama* selected to be the child's teacher, who will instruct him in theological matters. These children are taken from their parents at a very young age and are brought up in a cave or hut, completely shut off from contact with daylight. The physical world, then, exists for the child only in the mind, an imagined planet he has never seen. All this heightens his awe, his great wonder, at the richness of material life in the world around him when at last he is permitted to see the splendor of daylight, the marvel of the quotidian.

Ereira's documentary explores the Kogi's belief in the Mother with visual grace; abstract scenes of swirling motion and images of liquid depths accompany the voice-over narration of how the world was created.

In the beginning there was blackness, only the sea. In the beginning there was no sun, no moon, no people. There were no animals, no plants. Only the sea. The sea was the Mother. The Mother was not people. . . . She was when she was. Spirit. She was memory and possibility. . . . And then she wondered, how would we create a living thing? It was hard to understand how to make a human. The mother had to think very hard. How does an eye work? How does a foot work? . . . The mother bled. She was fertile and the world was fertile.

The artistic effect is to call attention to the mythology's intellectual complexity, though the narration does not go into nearly the detail that has been provided by anthropologist Reichel-Dolmatoff.

Many viewers, particularly feminists, will probably react first with interest in the personages of the film, the men who are the *mamas*, then with sympathy for the Kogi, who lost large numbers of their people during the violent years of Spanish incursion and who now eke out lives through subsistence farming in what was once a more highly populated region, living among the ruins of their ancestors, the Tairona. But ultimately the film is likely to elicit incredulity and impatience at the dissonance between what the cosmological mythology encodes and how the Kogi manifest their mythology in their daily lives.

Despite the noted reticence and seclusion of the Kogi people, who, Ereira emphasizes, do not cultivate a relationship with Westerners, there are available in English a number of anthropological articles by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, who published his studies of the Kogi over a period of more than three decades. About this completely male administration of a female theology, Reichel-Dolmatoff is quite blunt. He says "there is a marked antifeminist tendency" in Kogi culture ("Training" 270) and specifies the male attitude toward women, who "show but little interest in metaphysical matters": "to a Kogi man [women] personify all the elements of indulgence, of disruption, and of irresponsibility. 'They are like cockroaches,' the Kogi grumble, 'always near the cooking place, and eating all the time!'" (271). As Reichel-Dolmatoff describes them, Kogi men have a great anxiety and sense of repression about sexual matters, which the women apparently do not share, and this difference in attitude further contributes to the male scorn of women in the tribe.

Reichel-Dolmatoff identifies the Kogi mythology as an existing example of the archetype of the Great Mother, as described by Erich Neumann (see Reichel-Dolmatoff "Great Mother" 83). Neumann himself would surely have agreed, explaining that the apparent contradiction between spiritual mythology and society itself is inconsequential. According to Neumann, the "question whether or not the dominance of this archetypally 'feminine' world involves the economic or political domination of the woman is here irrelevant" (qtd. in Reichel-Dolmatoff 91). Though Neumann's study of this archetype depends upon countless examples, carefully documented, from various cultures' artwork, he says, "The archetypal image . . . lives in the individual as in the group, in the man as well as the woman. When therefore we say that the matriarchal world precedes the patriarchal world, we are not referring to a set of sociological structures" (91).

Here Neumann is willing to substitute an abstraction, "matriarchal," that is fundamentally opposed to the very same specific examples that purport to advance it. It is difficult to agree with Neumann, though his ideas about an archetype of the matriarchal do seem to apply to the contemporary example of the misogynist Kogi and their cosmology of the Great Mother. This severing of mythic from social implies that mythic essences of sex or gender (Neumann seems to conflate the two) need carry

no correspondence to the lives women actually live. I find this suggestion disquieting, even when it serves to advance ecofeminist argument.

Peggy Reeves Sanday has surveyed a wide number of cultures' origin tales—though the Kogi do not appear in her study—as “scripts” for male and female power, and she provides some interesting statistical correlations, often providing tables to chart cultural and environmental correlations with male dominance. She notes that a culture may have a “mythical male dominance” in its social functioning, in which “male aggression against women” and “exercise by women of political and economic power” coexist (165). Mythical male dominance is to be distinguished from “real male dominance [which] evolves when the primary dependence for social continuity during times of severe stress is found in the male world,” leading to disenfranchisement of women from the secular sphere (199). Sanday finds that this combination of “formal male authority and informal female power” (165) appears frequently in cultures' response to stresses such as colonial domination, famine, migration, and the like. Specifically, she finds male dominance and sexual inequality correspond to “increasing technological complexity, an animal economy, sexual segregation in work, a symbolic orientation to the male creative principle, and stress” (171).

I believe Sanday would classify the Kogi as a culture with mythical rather than real male dominance, judging from both Ereira's and Reichel-Dolmatoff's descriptions of daily family life. Yet there are several striking variances from Sanday's profile among the Kogi's practices and beliefs. These variances are of interest not only in comparison with Sanday's anthropological findings but in their implications for contemporary ecofeminist theory, especially since the Kogi have placed themselves, through Ereira's documentary, in the direct position of offering cultural critique and ecological advice to the Western industrial nations.

Certainly the Kogi have undergone stress since the diaspora of various tribes of Santa Marta Indians, in response to Spanish incursions at the end of the sixteenth century; Reichel-Dolmatoff notes that the Kogi themselves claim “multiple origins for their present ethnicity” (“Great Mother” 77). The Spanish introduced some livestock to the Kogi, who now keep mules, cattle, chickens, and pigs, but they cannot be said to have an economy based primarily on animals, either through hunting or husbandry. Planting and gathering appear to play a much more important role in their diet and their view of themselves, and meat is not their primary source of protein.

Sexual segregation in the division of work clearly exists in their production both of food and of other aspects of material culture. Ereira's film records that women are the planters of food crops, such as beans, emphasizing the connection between women and planetary fertility. Men, how-

ever, cultivate cotton for cloth production. Interestingly, the relegation to men of all weaving is a marked divergence from Sanday's findings; she specifically notes that loom weaving and spinning are usually the work of women. The Kogi themselves record that the Great Mother was once the only being with the knowledge of weaving, and her son learned the art spying one night when she thought he was asleep.

While the Kogi have incorporated iron hoes and picks and some limited mule power into their lives as farmers, they have vigorously resisted most new technologies and mechanization, in accordance with their opposition to the ecological results of industrialism. Indeed, the Kogi *mamas* quoted in the film imply that their society is in fact simpler and less materialistic than it was prior to Spanish contact, since the Spanish destroyed and disrupted the economic and social systems of so many indigenous peoples while they plundered the region for artifacts and precious metals, primarily gold.

Finally, the Kogi origin mythology gives primary orientation to female symbolism, with the Great Mother as the ultimate progenitor of the universe. Both the mythology and its ritual manifestations in Kogi cultural life, however, recognize the interdependence of male and female principles, as is evident in the way that masculinity and femininity are seen as contributing to fabric—and to the fabric of life.

Thus Kogi culture clearly evidences two of the five factors associated with male dominance (division of work and stress), while two are largely absent (increasing technological complexity and symbolic orientation to the male principle) and one may be considered at best only partially present (reliance on an animal food source). This combination of cultural factors seems consistent with Sanday's notion of mythic male dominance. Indeed, Sanday finds mythical male dominance most frequent among "advanced agriculturalists, hunters, and horticulturalists" (171)—the Kogi most closely resembling horticulturalists.

Sanday would likely argue that the stress of Spanish colonialism may have been the primary factor leading to the apparent male dominance, while the importance placed on the female principle as embodied in the Great Mother may have prevented actual sexual inequality or pervasive physical abuse of women. Her analysis tends to focus on how external or historical events shape cultural change that contributes to the oppression of women, whereas traditional cultural "scripts" for female and male sexual power may resist cultural change and preserve the power of women. I would now like to reverse Sanday's foci, however, and consider the question raised by contemporary ecoteminists: Could a resurrection or introduction of mythology that emphasizes female sexual power (unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition of a masculine sky god) help foster both the social equality of women and greater ecological care for nature?

While some ecofeminists note that any essentialist thinking that champions female creativity and strength as "procreative" holds a danger for feminists, others insist that if we could only reestablish a spiritual mythology in which women's procreative capabilities are valued, we could reeducate our own culture to reject both sexist oppression and environmental degradation. Or as the bumper stickers with the image of a living planet, richly green and blue, say: "Love your Mother."

Jane Caputi makes one of the most clearly articulated cases for some new feminist spirituality as a corrective for our contemporary cultural ailments. She says that the "Western patriarchal tradition that ordains the domination of women, people of color, and nature, that severs nature from culture, that trashes the earth while fetishizing Space/Heaven, that idolizes the machine and denies the cycles of life while pushing the notion of linear progression [causes] ecological crises and produc[es] nuclear annihilation." She then claims, "In order to halt the wasting of the Earth, we now desperately need new and transformative words, symbols, and metaphors for female potency, cosmic power, the mysteries of life and death, the being of nature, the sacredness of the Earth" (242). Karen Warren coins a term for the sorts of things Caputi calls for. Warren calls them "ecofeminist spiritualities" and defines them as life affirming rather than life denying, intended to counter the patriarchy's "closely linked" domination of women and domination of nature (130).

What light do the Kogi shed on these claims? While some may object that we cannot draw firm analogies between indigenous cultures and contemporary cultural movements (such as that of the white Western feminists under discussion), I want to make clear that I intend no such tidy correspondence. Of course, the many cultural variables that distinguish one group from another necessarily make it impossible to infer that one will necessarily follow the other's course if we simply swap a few variables. However, that is precisely the implication behind calls for creating neogoddess mythology to serve as a cultural/environmental corrective. Rather than simply dismiss Caputi's and Warren's suggestions as anthropologically unsound, I think it can be helpful for contemporary ecofeminists to reconsider the assumptions these writers make about gender and ecology on the basis of some input from another cultural perspective, despite the admitted difficulty of relying on interpretive translations—either the documentarians' or the anthropologists'.

It would appear initially that the example of the Kogi supports Caputi's claim. It is true that the Kogi have a mythology full of "transformative words, symbols, and metaphors for female potency, cosmic power," and so forth. And they have a very ecologically aware society, as evidenced by their admonition to "younger brother" that "he" must stop his destructive acts against the body of the Mother. (Reichel-Dolmatoff even pub-

lished a "case study" of the Kogi's "environmental awareness" [see "Cultural Change"] | Modern technological exploitation amounts to dismemberment, say the Kogi, and it will kill the animate Earth on whom we all depend.

But the cosmology of "female potency" has not prevented contemporary Kogi society from fracturing into what their most assiduous student calls a "markedly antifeminist" world in which men and women live parallel but not equal lives. It is difficult to determine precisely how much of that misogynist attitude has developed since the incursion of the Spanish and how much may have preceded their arrival. But the fact remains that the living mythology, as administered by the *mamas*, has not protected Kogi women from the sexist contempt of the men they live with; indeed, it would appear, Kogi men are downright misogynist—though apparently not physically abusive—in their personal lives. This culture has not allowed its celebratory, life-affirming symbolism to inform an appreciation of actual women within the society; though the earth remains honored in daily life, the mothers do not

Similarly, though intended to be celebratory, the ecofeminist exhortation to revalue traditional—"natural"—female roles or characteristics (life-giving, nurturing, etc.) sounds suspiciously like familiar misogynist appeals, such as those issued by the Victorians. And within this call for a revaluation of the female procreative power lie clear traces of the very dualistic polarity that seems to have driven a devaluing of the "other." As Carol A. Stabile points out, "By asserting that women's natural, instinctive, and primal link with nature is superior to man's rational, objective, and mediated relationship to nature, [ecofeminists] remain trapped within the dualistic logic of rationality" (54). Similarly, some ecofeminists imply that since patriarchal Christianity favors the Father, Heaven, and the spirit over the Mother, the Earth, and the body, we must correct that destructive way of thinking by substituting its opposite.

But in prescribing and valuing personality traits and behavior by gender, both sexes are limited by an implied, if not overtly stated, proscription in the choices of self-expression and community participation available to them. Patrick Murphy has further explained the problem in reference to the current scientific and literary resurrection of the name of a Greek goddess—"Gaia"—for the earth: "Sex-typing a gender-free entity . . . reinscribes an anthropomorphism that *alienates* Earth by trying to render it in our image. To say that we must describe it in human terms in order to understand it is to claim that we and it are separate and *other*. A division that alienates male and female can hardly serve to reunite Earth and humanity" (165). While ecofeminists have good cause to call for images of woman-in-her-own likeness among the spiritual cosmologies we turn to, neither an easy substitution of female godhead for male nor a

cosmology that perpetuates traditional gender norms—though altering the valuational interpretation of those norms—will do much to free us from the difficulties ecofeminists have so accurately identified.

The cultural relationship of human beings with the natural world of which they are a part is, and must remain, intricately complex. The Kogi metaphor of weaving is actually quite appropriate—the cultural web or cloth that, through religion, art, and language itself, binds us to all other living things cannot be reduced to purposive images of clear simplicity. Ecofeminist desires to construct feminist mythologies or spiritualities, in the same way one might manufacture herbal vitamin supplements or design an advertising campaign are misguided. “Love your Mother” just doesn’t say—or explore—enough.

Moreover, an anachronistic effort to resurrect ancient images of a fertility goddess as a feminist model would ignore a very real contemporary danger—one that has unfortunately not yet entered very far into the symbolic or mythic realm of the human psyche: the pressures of human population on the very tissue of interconnectedness that is life on this planet. Much of the original mythic power of the fertility goddess must have sprung from the tenuousness of human life in a context of high infant mortality and numerous other mortal dangers.

Now, however, the situation is decidedly altered: our very presence on the planet, in great numbers and in societies of great resource consumption, is itself becoming a much greater threat to the species than that of individual mortality. Yet, though scientists and activists point out with statistics and graphs what will likely be the physical effects of overpopulation, our collective psyches do not yet register these dangers. Goddess images of “female potency” that focus primarily on reproductive power may also fail to resonate with the growing numbers of women who do not perceive their creativity to derive, solely or even in part, from biological fertility—and who choose not to have children.

Indeed, such images will actually serve us poorly by reinforcing our current reluctance to recognize, with full psychic weight, the new but actual dangers of unlimited population growth that we must come to face. Much more useful to us in the long run would be an enhanced, extended understanding of our ethical connection to the nonhuman world, an understanding that transcends or alters traditional concepts of gender because it challenges traditional concepts of personhood. The strongest argument for “feminist spiritualities” or “metaphors for female potency” is that myth, art, and cultural symbolism have deep and powerful ties not only to the human psyche but to human behavior. However, I maintain that a didactic use of matriarchal imagery and myth retains the very limitations it seeks to go beyond: both gender stereotypes and androcentrism continue to be the key values.

The great challenge for feminists and environmentalists, at this end of

the millennium, is to move beyond the causes these groups have detailed so accurately and make a bold leap forward, transcending traditional concepts of both gender and species. In this way we may come further toward what Aldo Leopold defined nearly fifty years ago as the Land Ethic: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (224–25).

While Leopold, like many of the "nature writers" who have shaped the public sense of ecology, could not fully transcend the patriarchy he lived in, in this most famous quotation from *A Sand County Almanac* we find little or no trace of it. I believe that the new, pressing work for environmentalists and feminists alike is to find ways to figure the ethos of "the biotic community," of the full environment, of Earth, without returning to the prescriptive/proscriptive gender assignments that have constrained us.

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Notes

1. I rely on the 1992 US edition published by Knopf; the text was originally published in Great Britain as *The Heart of the World* by Jonathan Cape (London, 1990).

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