

We would go on little trips leaving Bogotá city behind, the roads lead us through the outskirts of the city into the countryside high up into the mountains. Due to the guerrillas it wasn't safe to go far up these small mountain roads. A thirty to sixty minutes drive would be sufficient Johan must have thought. Struck by the natural beauty of the scenery, these mountain landscapes, I looked silently out of the window. We would pass horses, cows and donkeys. Old American cars and trucks from the 50s. Quite odd since it's mid 70s, 1977 to be exact. At the time Colombia was extremely violent and unsafe. In traffic people would slam on your rear window. We were told not to look back otherwise your purse would be stolen or your dashboard would be empty. We were advised not to wear any kind of jewellery in public, no necklaces, earrings, watches or a wedding ring.¹

Despite the crime and poverty I discovered a richness and beauty I have never seen before. The high plateaux of the eastern Cordilleras of the Andes of present-day Colombia, where long before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores, situated in the provinces of Cundinamarca and Boyacá, the Indian people lived.² The traditions of the Indian people who lived in this natural environment - Muisca society was largely destroyed by the Spanish colonisation - are a field of interest by numerous scholars. Records of the Spanish chroniclers in combination with Muisca Archeology give a glimpse of information about their mythology and religious life. Clarify some issues and shed light on others in particular the existing relationship between the landscape where the Muisca lived, and their conception of the world.³ Back in the car continuing our trip on the winding roads I saw a number of little sheds or stalls made of wood and metal where soft drinks and other kind of beverages were sold. Either to truck drivers or people walking up the mountain slopes. Women could earn a little bit of money this way by selling fruit or soft drinks.

Only 32 kilometres southwest of Bogotá we stopped at Salto del Tequendama or The Tequendama Falls. A beautiful high waterfall of the Bogotá River. The soil of this forested area is covered with rocks, a diversity of plants, trees, grass and moss. I witness a synthesis of different shades of green. A wavy river plunging down into the void. When you stand close to the edges of the gorge and look down carefully one can see it perfectly clear, a by erosion deeply carved out river valley with steep cliffs. Looking at the spectacular view I remembered Johan words '..living high up the Colombian Andes it is not surprising the Muisca believed their surroundings were shaped by divine forces..⁴ The mountain 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. If the mountain played an important role in the life of the Muisca, its complement, water, had no less a part. The worship of mountain lakes are mentioned. Offerings which were regularly made, in the course of feasts and ceremonies, by depositing, on the shore of lakes, gold objects, emeralds, pottery or personal effects.

1 Written from the perspective of my mother, who travelled to Bogotá together with my father to adopt my brother in 1977.

2 The Symbolic Landscape of the Muisca by Francois Petitpierre. Source: Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 9, No. 1. (Winter, 1975).

3 Ibid.

4 <http://www.hiddenjourneys.co.uk/Miami-Buenos-Aires/Boyaca/Highest.aspx>

Muisca life was punctuated with purification rites of men, women and priests in connection with water. According to the Muisca mythology the creation and order of the world, the creation of man were all orchestrated by gods. Places where the two main elements of the landscape, mountain and water, met were the most venerated of all.⁵

And on this Sunday afternoon I was confronted with one of the great myths among the Muisca, concerned with waterfalls at Salto del Tequendama. Chibchachum - the god of earth, annoyed with men, had flooded the world that nearly destroyed the human race; Bochica - the civilising god, appeared in a rainbow and struck the rocks with his golden staff, permitting the waters to flow away by the celebrated cataract of Tequendama.⁶ According to another legend, during the Spanish conquest and evangelization of the Americas, in order to escape the new colonial order the Muisca people of the area would jump off the Salto Del Tequendama and become eagles to fly to their freedom. Today sadly The Tequendama Falls has the dubious honour of being the largest wastewater falls in the world. Liquid wastes from the city are flushed untreated into the Bogotá River at the lower edge of the savannah, a few kilometres upstream of the Tequendama Falls. Downstream from Bogotá, the river is filled with sewage.⁷

I look up. An occasional bird is flying high to the summit of the mountains. The sky was cloudy, at times the sun would appear. It was the month of June so during the daytime the temperature is quiet pleasant around 18°C, not too warm. Also the day and night are almost the same amount of hours, a consistency throughout the year. The sun rises around 6 in the morning and sets around 6 in the evening. Johan signals it's time to go and we hop in the car and continue our journey.

5 The Symbolic Landscape of the Muisca by Francois Petitpierre. Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 9, No.1.(Winter,1975).

6 Ibid.

7 Urban water management in Bogotá, Colombia - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_water_management_in_Bogot%C3%A1,_Colombia