

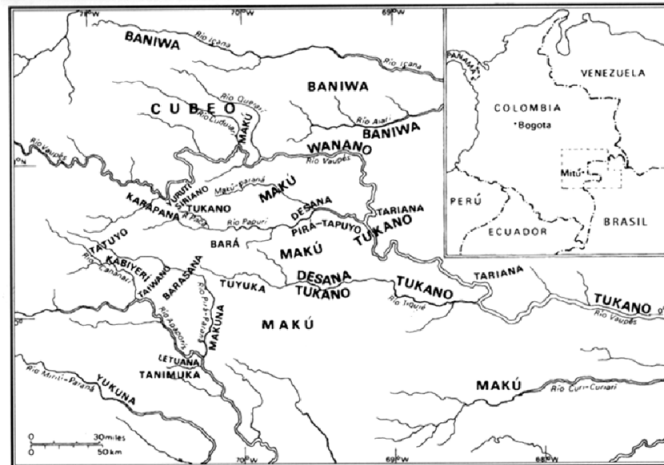


# Principles of Life and the Life Spiral

in the cosmology of Misak, Nasa and Coconucos

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**Desana** (Tukano family) (mimí-porá “Sons of the Humming Bird”



Regions: Vaupéz,  
 Brazilian Amazonas  
 (Brazilian-Colombian  
 border)  
 Population cca: 2 200  
 Language: Tucano

**Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff**

**Kogi** (Kággaba) (“jaguar”)



Regions: Magdalena,  
 Cesar, La Guajira  
 Population: cca. 10 000  
 Language Kogian  
 (Chibcha family)



**Lata-lata** is how Misak express the original conditions of harmony and equality. This is what people should strive to achieve and live in balance with nature.

The basic Life principles amongst the tribes of the south region of the Andes are based on dualistic views. There are a few basic principles in between which society, people, animals and plants live and which should strive to be in a balance:

**Hot and cold**  
**Left and right**  
**Above and below**



Misak`s cosmology is principally based on dualities, which in their co-existence maintain the equilibrium of the World.

For example, all the plants, minerals, places, animals and even situations are of **cold (pishi)** or **hot (pachi)** essence. Misbalance of hot and cold causes illnesses (and medicine plants are used accordingly).

Even the greetings people use on everyday bases are chosen according to the fact *if the moment is more of a cold or more of a hot nature*. Thus when the Sun shines, *hello* is **pachiteken**, and when it is cold, it is **pishiteken**.

Similarly, when a Misak shaman (*mørøbik: the one who works with water*) performs rituals of divination, he pays attention to the side from which specific sensations are coming. **The left side** represents all that is “**positive**” and **the right side** all that is “**negative**”. This is closely connected to the river **Piendamó**, which flows from the male lake **Piendamó** *from the right side towards the left* (From the east to the west, this basic rule of orientation was set according to the easterly winds, which prevail over the westerly winds in this part of the world, the direction of wind thus determines the fundamental direction of all movement).

**On the left side**, there are entities which represent well-being and “**positive**” energy like: the Sun, páramos, ancestors, wilderness, thunder, wild plants, warm-blooded animals, shamans and healers.

**On the right side** are entities which represent “**negative**” energy. Amongst them are: the Moon, plants of cold essence (mostly the plants of lower regions), cold-blooded animals, ice, death, rainbow etc.

This division of the world into two opposite principles can be easily compared to certain Asian philosophies (**Chinese yin and yang**).

This viewpoint corresponds even with the fact that in both cases the principles manifest themselves as contrary forces only in our material world (for they can't exist one without the other, and each of them originated from the opposite principle- in order to balance the whole existence).

Thus for example *“in the cold parts of the land, there are “warm” plants, while in the warm parts of the land are those of “cold” essence... it is the same with people, those with cold blood live in the valleys, and those with warm blood high in the mountains...”* (Hugo Portela Guarín, *El pensamiento de las aguas de las montañas*, p. 37)

Formando parte de los tres mundos y circulando bidireccionalmente (izquierda-derecha-izquierda, abajo-arriba-abajo) están el frío y el calor, cuyo equilibrio (los no excesos de frío o calor, lo “fresco”) surge del uso social que hacen los indígenas del territorio a partir de su clasificación, interpretación y operacionalización a través de normas. En esta perspectiva “lo bravo”, “hieloso”, “pta’ndz”, “auca”, son categorías que en los universos indígenas indican, recuerdan y anuncian la amenaza potencial porque son estados de desarmonía; cuando las personas los sienten suponen que hubo ruptura del equilibrio y que, por lo tanto, son la materialización de la sanción.

La verticalidad de los tres mundos en la cosmografía indígena es una unidad. En su horizontalidad esa unidad se encuentra diferenciada en dos secciones, una izquierda y una derecha, articuladas por un punto central, indicador del equilibrio, la armonía y el bienestar. Al hacer una extrapolación al cuerpo humano también encontramos una sección izquierda y una derecha, con la coronilla como punto central marcador de equilibrio. Esas secciones quedan en evidencia cuando se disponen, material y simbólicamente, los elementos que constituyen la parafernalia para los rituales de limpieza y refrescamiento. Al lado izquierdo están las señas que indican bienestar, la energía “positiva”: el sol, el páramo, lo salvaje, los ancestros, el trueno, las plantas bravas, los animales de sangre caliente, el morobik, el thë’wala, el macuco, el curandero, el río que corre de derecha a izquierda sacando la suciedad (el mal) del territorio. Al lado derecho está la luna, las plantas frías, el médico que no trabaja bien, la seña que indica no-bienestar, el exceso de lo bravo, hieloso, pta’ndz, auca, algo así como la energía “negativa”. **Hugo Portela Guarín**, *El Pensamiento de las Aguas de las Montañas*



Desana:

Man and animal complement each other in the procreative circuit in the biosphere.

Human society and the fauna of its habitat both participate in the same great potential of reproductive energy, a large circuit that animates the biosphere in a continual ebb and flow. The fecundity of men and animals comes from one source and is composed of male energy (*tulári*) and female energy (*bogá*). It is not an inexhaustible source, but a restricted capital.

On the material level, this bond is represented by blood- "The blood is a tie that establishes communication and unity. Between men and animals there is a very close kinship, and the expression of this kinship is blood." (Desana)

The Desana's tradition recognizes the man's tendency to consume without restraint as well as his tendency to exploit the environment. That is why the Desana culture has formulated a series of very strict rules in order to assure the maintenance of a biotic equilibrium.

Desana- there are periods of abundance (in between the rains) and relative scarcity (rain seasons). The periods of abundance represent the periods of danger (it is very important that people stay on friendly terms with the Master of the Animals)- cleansing rituals and invocation. Protein cannot be consumed without diminishing the total energy of the biosphere. The periods of scarcity are safe. The food consumed is "inoffensive", practically ritual and disequilibrium is avoided.



Time unfolds in a spiral. Misaks say that Time is actually a snail shell, *srurrapu*, which is constantly on the move. Only from our perspective, it moves backwards, so the past is in front of us and the future behind.



This important concept of Misak cosmology is reflected in their language, **namtrik**.

The tenses in namtrik are not expressed grammatically, but lexically.

To say that something happened in the past, we use the word *metrap*, which also means *ahead, in front of*.

To say that something is going to happen in the future, we use the word *wente*, which also means *behind* and symbolizes everything that is unknown and uncertain, for we can't see it. It is placed behind us not only in time, but also in place.

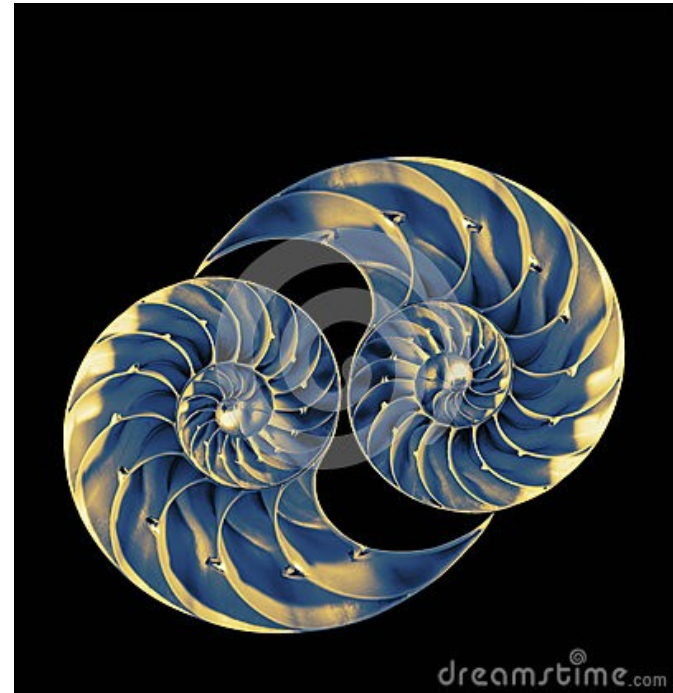
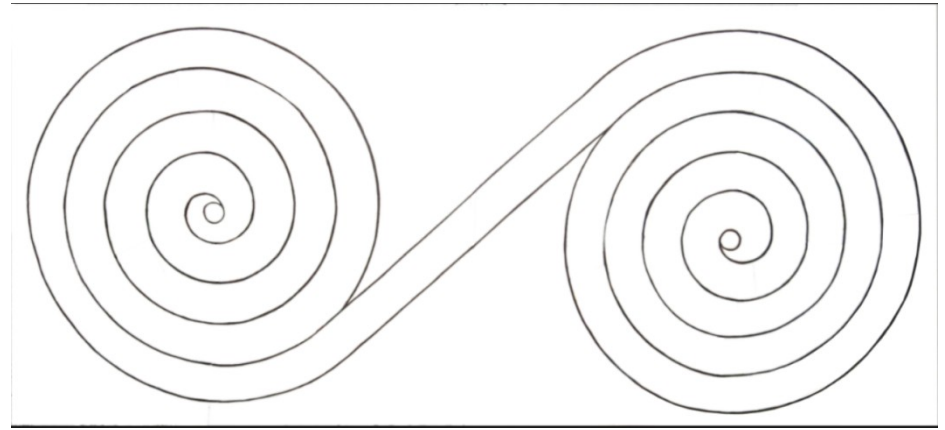
Surprisingly, we can find similar time and space orientation in the religious literature of ancient Ugarit (today's Syria), where **the past** was all that is found **before us** and the **future** all that is **behind us**. In the Ugaritic language, these expressions also corresponded with the west and east direction, where **the east was in the front and the west behind**.



The traditional **tampal kuari** hat symbolizes the spiral of life with its most important stages, the Misak territory and the unfolding space-time of our whole universe.

The spiral is a symbol of Time,  
Life and the known World.

When one life finishes or when  
one world finishes, there is a  
time period called *spiritual return*  
(*mōsik*), then after some time the  
spirit is reborn once again.



Picture by taita  
Juan Bautista  
Ussa Ulluné.



In everyday life, weaving on a loom represents the life cycle and the way the life of every individual is intertwined with the whole community, its history and all the land around. Thus everybody is attached to the central point of the Beginning. The spider`s web should remind us of this fact.

## Chumbes and jigras



“No hay nada sin historia. Quien no la tiene, se acabó. Los blancos dicen a los indios: cuénteme un cuento. Y si ellos hablan, los blancos dicen que es cuento. Y sólo queda eso: un cuento. Y allí se acabó la historia. La historia es de todos; cada uno debe hablar su parte; entre todos se da un redondeo”.

Taita Abelino Dagua,  
Exgobernador guambiano

**And how will it all end?**

**For comparison: tribe according to the people U`wa (Sierra Nevada del Cocoy)**

The three worlds are associated with colours:

The Upper World is **white**

The World Below is **red**

Our World is the combination of these colours, which in this case is **blue and yellow**.

The importance is to keep balance to the Middle World, once that one gets out of balance, the red colour from the Underworld leaks into the white colour of the Upper World, and this will mean the end of the Universe. To maintain the balance is the task of people.

Compare with: Coconucos, Misak, Nasa and Kogi.







Three worlds and  
their connections

