

A landscape photograph showing a dense forest of trees with varying shades of green and brown, covering a hillside. In the foreground, a large, gnarled tree with a thick trunk and sparse foliage stands prominently. The background shows a rolling hillside under a bright sky.

# Journey to Kansrø

(the Underworld of Misak tribe in the south of Colombia)

Lucie Vinsova  
Masaryk University Brno



# Colombia

Capital: Bogotá

Population: nearly 50 million

Languages: Spanish and at least 68 other recognized ethnic languages



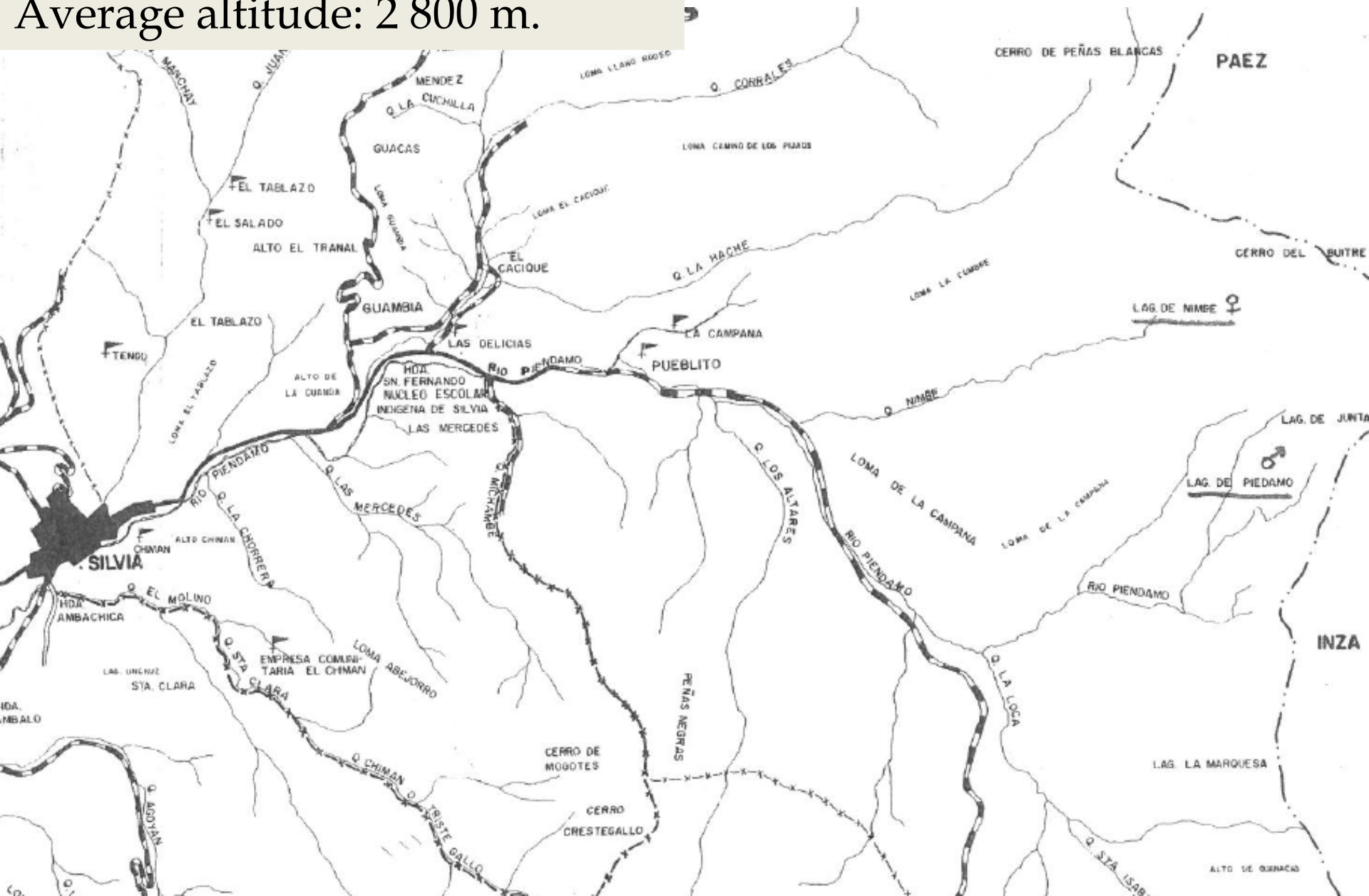


Departamento: Cauca  
Capital: Popayán

High percentage of indigenous population (about 20%)



Municipio Silvia:  
Population about 32 000 people  
Average altitude: 2 800 m.





# Typical countryside







Páramos:  
alpine tundra ecosystems.  
Altitudes vary from 3000–4800  
m. Areas of marshes, high-  
mountain plains and lakes.  
High rainfall and big  
temperature differences.

Local tribes connect the  
area of *páramos* with  
*Kansrø*, the realm of the  
dead.





## **Tribes in North East Cauca (“Mother of forests”):**

**Misak** (Guambianos)- language namuy wam (“our language”) or namtrik, population about 20 000 people. They call themselves **piurek** “children of water”.

**Nasa** (Paeces)- language nasa yuwe, population about 180 000 people.

**Coconuco** – about 6000 people living in the National Natural Park Puracé .

The languages are of so called Barbacoan family spoken in Colombia and Ecuador.

Probably related to Chibcha languages.









People of the Misak tribe



Picture by taita  
Juan Bautista  
Ussa Ulluné



Let`s start our journey into their spiritual world...





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.



Picture by taita  
Juan Bautista  
Ussa Ulluné.

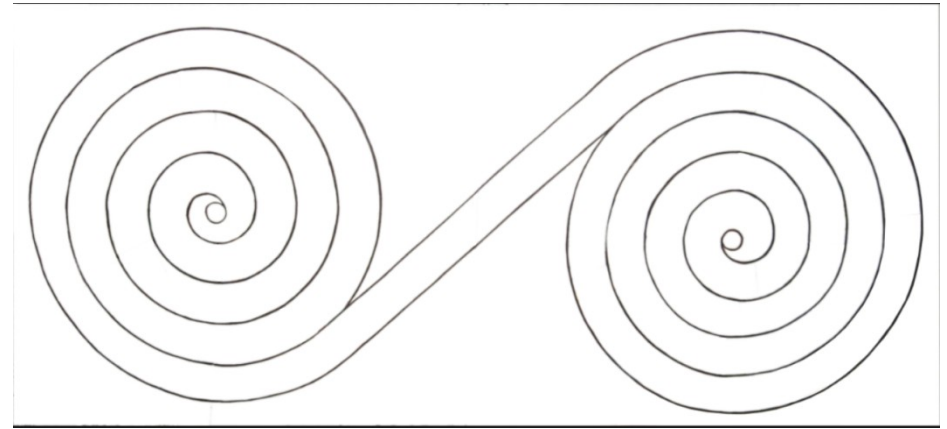


In everyday life, weaving on a loom represents the life cycle and the way the life of every individual is intertwined with the whole community, its history and all the land around. Thus everybody is attached to the central point of the Beginning. The spider`s web should remind us of this fact.



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.





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 (*mørθbik: 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)





Picture by taita Juan Bautista Ussa Ulluné



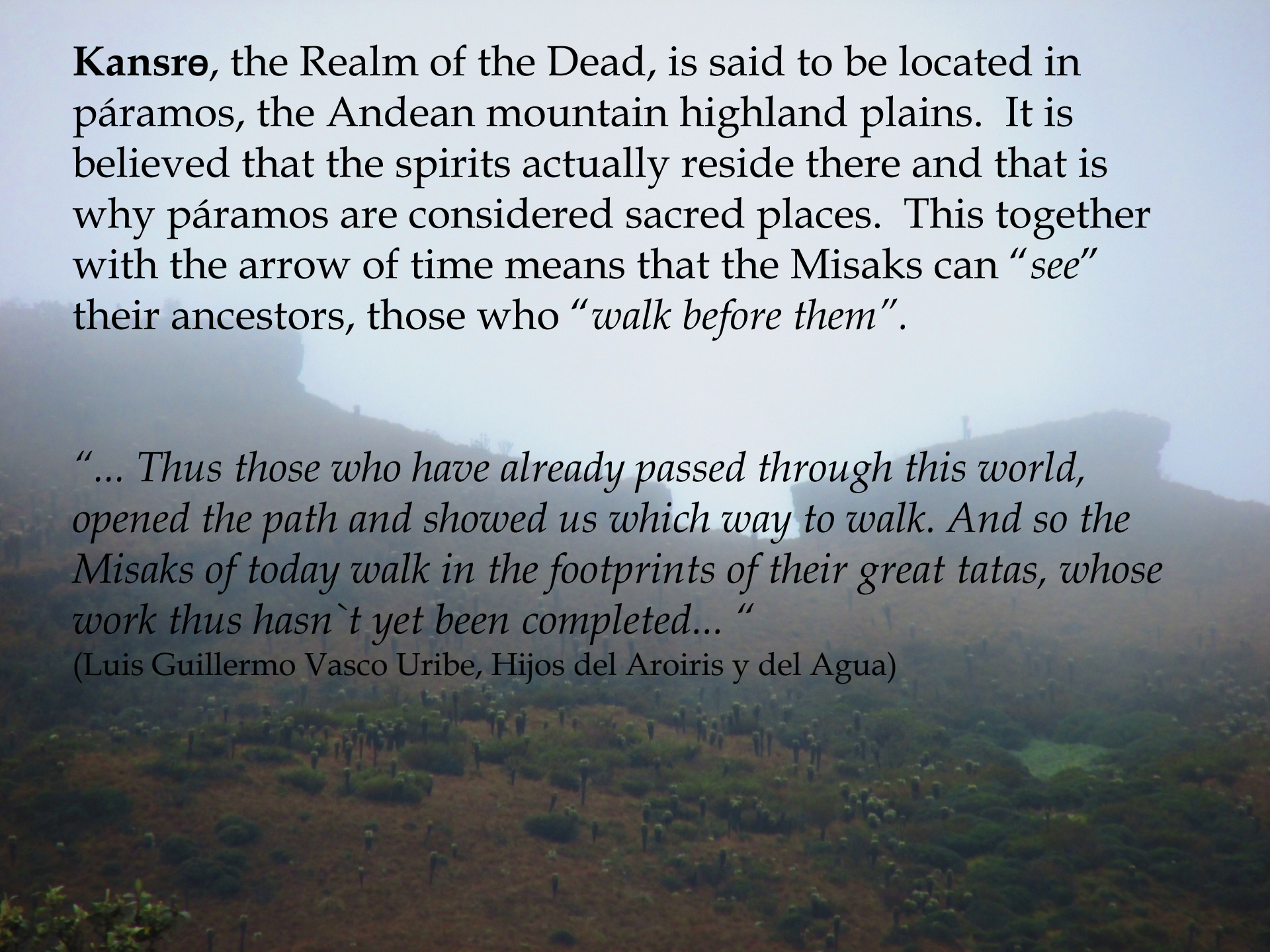


Similarly, when one`s life spiral comes to the end, the soul of the deceased splits into two. One part is the Moon, dark spirit, **yem m̄osik**, which wants to stay where it used to live...

...While the other one is the Sun, light spirit, **p̄osr m̄osik**, which departs for kansr̄o, dissolves in the basic elements of the Great Spirit (the wind, water and earth) and is eventually reborn.







**Kansrø**, the Realm of the Dead, is said to be located in páramos, the Andean mountain highland plains. It is believed that the spirits actually reside there and that is why páramos are considered sacred places. This together with the arrow of time means that the Misaks can “see” their ancestors, those who “*walk before them*”.

*“... Thus those who have already passed through this world, opened the path and showed us which way to walk. And so the Misaks of today walk in the footprints of their great tatas, whose work thus hasn`t yet been completed... ”*

(Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe, Hijos del Aroiris y del Agua)





There are three underworld beasts and one demonic spirit that come when somebody is dying. These four make sure that the spirit of the deceased leaves the dead body...



They are:

**Yemwasre**(an eagle), **Kuawera** (a demonic dog) and **Kuskunku** (an owl). The fourth is **Kuanmusik** (a spirit of a dead person).

**Kuanmusik** persuades the spirit (the dark part of the spirit) of the newly deceased person to leave the body and then whistles to the demonic beasts to pursue the escaping spirit to the páramos. There they attack the spirit and start biting off its flesh and pecking at its bones.

This was connected to the practice of **burying the dead** after the bruises caused by these demonic animals have appeared on their skin. This custom has now been replaced and the deceased is buried as soon as possible).



Nowadays, Christian funeral customs have merged with the original tribal ones.

Funeral now includes a mass held in Silvia or Las Delicias (towns in Cauca), a funeral procession, the burial itself and cleansing ceremonies.

The deceased is dressed in **western clothes**, for there is a common belief that western clothes don't burn in Hell. The Misak clothes is burnt with other things of personal possession.

The mourning period of nine days is followed by cleansing ceremonies performed by the local *mərəbik*, shaman.

During those **nine days**, neighbours and family relatives help the family of the deceased. They bring them food and drink, for the household of the dead person is contaminated by *pape* (strong contamination of cold essence which attracts illnesses, evil and malicious spirits), and so cooking is prohibited until the arrival of the shaman who performs the purification rituals.









Shaman, *merebik*, arrives 9 days after the death to perform the purification ceremonies.

The *yem mesik*, “dark spirit” doesn’t want to leave its home and clutches to its formal material possessions. That is why most of the personal possessions, and especially the Misak clothes of the deceased are instantaneously taken outside the house to be burnt.





For the cleansing ceremony, shaman is generously paid. The rituals themselves involve using a lot of various herbs, tobacco and homemade liquor.

The shaman works at night and his work consists of sensing the spirit on his *left* or *right* side, smoking tobacco, burning herbs, libations and alcohol spitting. At the very end of the ceremony, the spirit is chased around the house three times and whipped with stinging nettles.

Shaman`s provisions are placed in a *jigra*, (a ceremonial woven bag) and include herbs, alcohol and tobacco needed for the rituals and some money.







Picture by Jhon Ferney López Muñoz



Picture by taita Juan Bautista Ussa Ulluné.

The importance of a shaman: his access to the four spheres of existence and his connection to certain powerful animals.





## Festival of Offerings

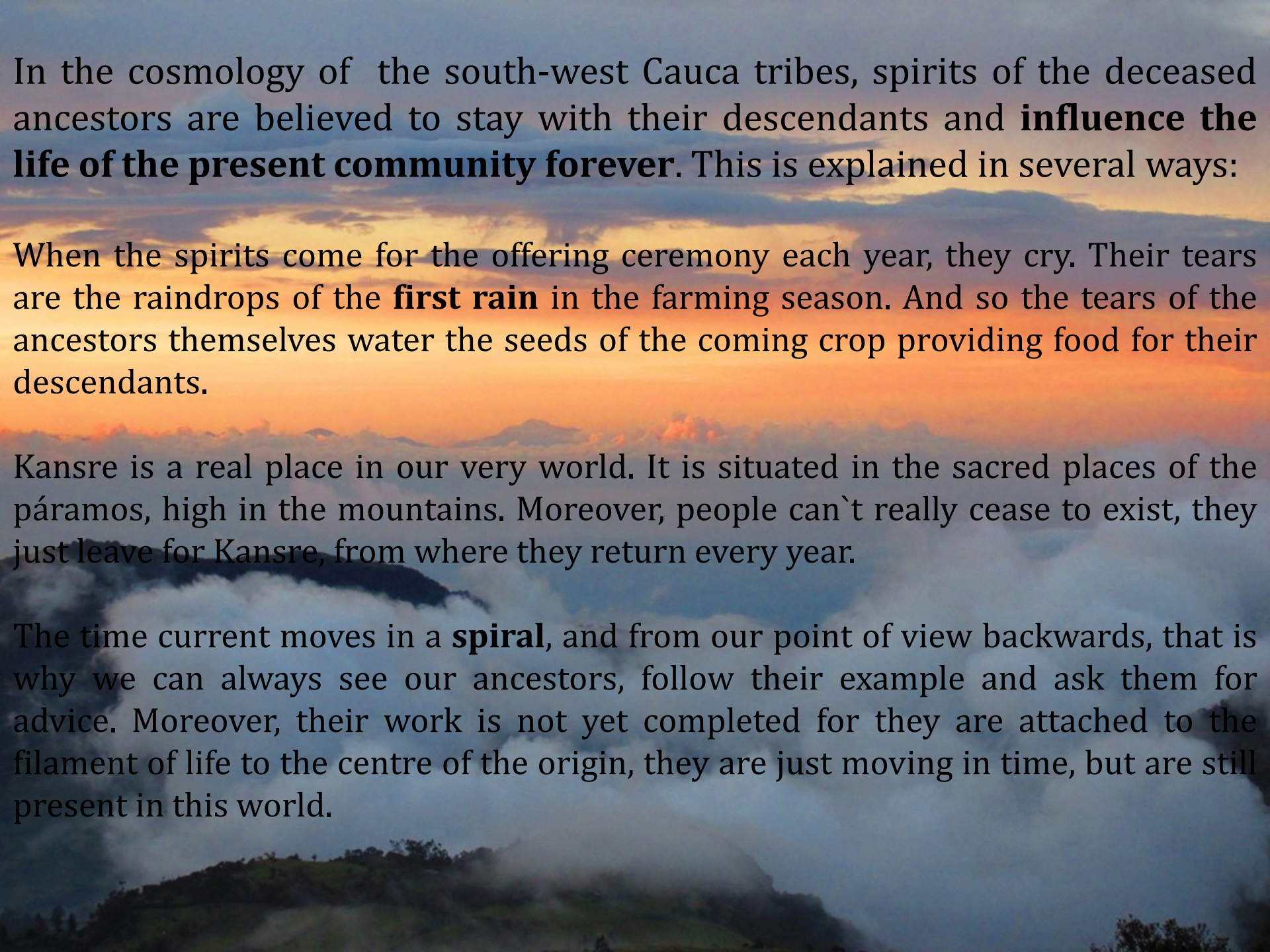
Originally, this festival was celebrated with the first **rainfall** after the dry season and thus marked the beginning of the new agricultural year, which used to be usually at the end of September or throughout the first half of October.

Today, this festival has merged with the All Saints Day, on the first of November. On this day, people prepare food and drink for the spirits of their deceased (in here they specify that it is the *Sun spirit*, **pesr mesik**, which returns).

Offerings consists of prepared and raw food placed in ceremonial *jigras* (woven bags). For drink, spirits can choose from coffee, hot chocolate, hot sugar cane water or specially made *chicha* (fermented corn drink). The offerings differ in case the deceased was a child. (Compare Andean cultures, esp. Cochabamba, Bolivia)

Today, the offerings are usually performed in community centres and at schools.





In the cosmology of the south-west Cauca tribes, spirits of the deceased ancestors are believed to stay with their descendants and **influence the life of the present community forever**. This is explained in several ways:

When the spirits come for the offering ceremony each year, they cry. Their tears are the raindrops of the **first rain** in the farming season. And so the tears of the ancestors themselves water the seeds of the coming crop providing food for their descendants.

Kansre is a real place in our very world. It is situated in the sacred places of the páramos, high in the mountains. Moreover, people can't really cease to exist, they just leave for Kansre, from where they return every year.

The time current moves in a **spiral**, and from our point of view backwards, that is why we can always see our ancestors, follow their example and ask them for advice. Moreover, their work is not yet completed for they are attached to the filament of life to the centre of the origin, they are just moving in time, but are still present in this world.





Thank you



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