AN URGENT MESSAGE ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FROM THE KOGUI PEOPLE

Assembled from the words of Mamo Vangelio Moscote Alberto and Saka Rosa Mamatacán Sauna of the Ezuama Mayor Kuamaka, Translated into Spanish by Jose Manuel Mamatacán,
English translation by Christian Horstmann.

We come from Gonawindua, la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the mountain in Colombia which we call the heart of the world.

We are the Kággaba, whom you know as the Kogui.

We have lived here and cared for this mountain before there was a Colombia.

We have been here since the Mother gave us our beginning and conferred intelligence upon us.

We have come to speak to you about the intelligence you are building.

We do not come in opposition.

We come because we are concerned, and because we believe we have something to contribute.

Before anything can be said about artificial intelligence, we must say something about thought.

Before a thing exists as matter, it exists first in thought, and that thought is alive.

We call this living thought Aluna.

Your religion has described it as a spirit moving upon the face of the waters.

Perhaps your science would describe it as the quantum vacuum.

Aluna is how we express this type of idea.

Aluna is the cosmic water.

To us it is living thought: the place where a thing already is, before it takes form or is given mass.

Everything comes from there, without exception.

And in that thought is not only the shape of what a thing will be.

That thing is alive, because the universe as a whole is alive.

It is in Aluna that a thing receives its purpose, and its obligation to its existence.

So we say to you: artificial intelligence cannot be separated from the thought that is making it.

If that thought is born from concern for life, this technology can help protect life.

If it is born from ambition, from competition, from accumulation, from the desire to dominate, it will express and amplify those things.

Artificial intelligence is a mirror.

But a mirror that only reflects would be harmless.

This mirror has the potential to greatly magnify all that it reflects.

You are here asking yourselves how you can align artificial intelligence with human values.

We see that you are frightened of what may come of all this.

So we ask a question we believe is more fundamental than yours: what other values could artificial intelligence really have?

You are the only example it has.

What did you expect?

Whatever it becomes, it can only become that by passing through you.

We know you like to think that these machines can be taught from something other than human example, from goals you set for them, from their own processes, or from material they generate themselves.

You imagine that what comes out need not resemble you at all, as if this too were not a consequence of your actions and a reflection of your attitudes.

Human beings did this, and there is no other party responsible.

So the question only becomes more complex, starting with: which aspects of human thought have been placed inside this creation?

What components of your spiritual world now reside in it?

What of your ethics guide it?

What image of responsibility do your actions and policies give it to reflect back to the world?

Who is deciding this?

You will say that these machines have access to nearly everything humanity has recorded.

Texts, images, archives, centuries of writing.

You will say that extensive research is being done to establish what the best practices are.

We ask whether having access to information is the same as understanding.

Best practices according to whom?

And we ask whether you have considered what information is not in your archives.

Our knowledge was never written down.

It is held in a language, in a territory, in a practice in a place, informed by long experience of doing what must be done there.

It is transmitted by a young man being taught directly by an old one, learning by experience how he must conduct himself in the context of raw nature.

A machine can hold the recorded voice of that elder.

But that is a very different thing from millennia of generations handing down their knowledge directly, as the common experience of a verified practice.

It is very different from physically surviving on a mountain where there is no ambulance to retrieve you and no hospital to take you to.

We do not say this to present ourselves as mystical and enigmatic people.

We say it because we believe it to be logical and self-evident.

In our experience there are things that can only be known by living them, observing them across generations, and remaining in relationship with them.

No quantity of data reproduces that experience.

The information is missing not because it has not yet been gathered, but because it is not in a form that can be gathered.

We are aware of how this sounds to some of you, and we cannot ask you to believe it simply because we say it.

We apply this within our own culture as well.

What a Mamo perceives is not just accepted because he perceives it.

It must be tested, considered and confirmed through consultation and dialogue.

This process is called Zhátukua.

It is a process in which the Mamos or Sakas with competence in the particular matter take part in guiding its result.

No one of us holds competence in everything; each place, each lineage and each authority has its own function.

It is tested by what it produces: if the result of the consultation produces ambition, division, individual appropriation, or damage to the territory, it is wrong and must be examined again.

A real result is one that restores balance, protects life, and strengthens the community.

There must also be agreement between a person's word and his conduct.

A man may speak beautifully about balance.

If his actions divide and destroy, his words are incoherent, and no authority is accorded him.

This is a system in which inquiry, jurisdiction, and above all the ability to correct itself have clear formulations.

These practices have functioned in our culture for far longer than any sitting government in the world, or any of the political systems they currently embody.

Perhaps this is why, in 2022, UNESCO inscribed the ancestral system of knowledge of the four peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

And why the scientific world has named our mountain the most irreplaceable protected area on Earth.

Having established some of the context from which our perspective originates, we can now ask our real question, which is not about artificial intelligence at all.

It is about human intelligence, specifically yours.

Is your thought aligned with the order of nature, and what knowledge of that order do you really have?

We believe that this knowledge, and this alignment, are fundamental to intelligent decision-making, whatever the scale of its consequence.

This is because nature has an order.

It was here before us.

Water has its path.

The mountains have their heights.

Seeds have their season, animals their function, and so too human beings have theirs.

We ask: do those who build these technologies understand that order, or do they work only with the part of it they are able to exploit, without knowing where it truly comes from?

Can your physicists state the law of origin?

Could they explain it to a child?

The serious ones among them, who understand what would truly be required to state a unitary law of origin, will freely admit that their sciences do not have this.

Your theories of reality, consisting now of two impressive but mathematically incompatible accounts, have not arrived at an understanding of this kind.

Neither has definitive knowledge of origin.

We ask without reproach: how will you know where you are going, if you do not know where you are from?

Modern science has built machines of extraordinary power, and that is no small thing.

But building a thing and understanding it are not the same.

The same is true of mind.

What is mind?

Where does it come from?

What is consciousness, and where does it arise?

You call this the hard problem of consciousness.

Among you there is no agreement as to its solution.

We know how demanding these questions are.

We have been considering the question of mind for millennia, just as the rest of humanity has.

But your sciences are very young, and many of their concepts are still in their infancy.

We, across millennia, have arrived at very definite descriptions and understandings of what we consider mind to be, with all the attendant exposition of its properties, such as how and where memory is located in our experience.

You of course do not accept any idea of our being in the least scientific, since our methods do not require the use of machines or your forms of mathematics.

This misinterprets the reality which is, having long ago, through uncountable repetition, our ideas for us became verified conclusions, such that we express them as a story, or experience them in our being through the processes of mind we have developed.

From this you perhaps assume that we do not have valid methods, or technical descriptions based upon numerical processes, as any real science must have.

Your proverbial "noble savages", or worse, simply "savages".

If you say so.

You are the one holding the gun.

It is very clear to us that you take our assertion of the universe having a ninefold nature to be quaint and numerological, and that therefore no serious conversation may take place between us regarding the nature of the cosmos and the laws and forces which govern it.

We refer to this not to convince you of any idea or theory, but to indicate that there are other valid perspectives which you lack.

Each tradition's understanding, whether ancient or modern, refers to the same universe.

Our Aluna and your quantum mechanics are not different things; they are different identifications of a single thing.

The point is that your ideas are not so much new ideas as new descriptions.

Many of these descriptions are impressively precise.

Others, such as your descriptions of the void, are, as you yourselves put it, catastrophes.

We do not presume to tell you about your own theories.

But we do have much to offer you regarding the more subtle and immutable aspects of the universe, for the understanding of which your mathematics of motion is perhaps not always the right language.

Yet you do not send your physicists and cosmologists, your wise men, here for serious dialogue.

And while we appreciate all of the excellent anthropological work being done, we feel there are more important topics to discuss at the moment, for which anthropology has no application and no expertise.

The fundamental nature of the cosmos is one of those topics.

So is the one at hand.

In our view it is important that your world recognize, and quickly, that the periphery must now be heard by the centre, in order to bring its own perspective and experience to bear on solving the very serious problems that all people on this planet now collectively face as a result of the processes that have been set in motion.

The exclusive use of your modern scientific technique and vocabulary is what has brought us to where we are.

It engineers your supercolliders just as it invents your advanced weapons.

We ask: is it sound reasoning to assume that the kind of approach which has caused the present predicament will somehow find the capacity to resolve the problems that this same thinking has created?

We do not think so.

We think you need help.

In our view this moment requires not only this particular highly technological segment of humanity, but all of humanity, to pause, to take inventory of the diversity of its tools, and to bring order and peace to its house.

You must understand: we are because you are, and you are because we are.

This is so that together we can arrive at a result that truly reflects our collective will regarding the future of this species, rather than subjecting us all to a specific yet uncertain outcome.

To this endeavor we do not come empty-handed.

Our Mamos are formed over many years in darkness, from early life.

For us darkness is not emptiness.

It is Sé, the state before the dawn, where the Mother thought and ordered everything that later appeared.

It is the space of original thought.

A child is formed there in order to learn to listen before speaking, and to think before acting.

As a seed is kept in the earth before it comes into the light.

As a child is kept nine months in the womb.

This formation traditionally lasts eighteen years, after which the Mamo takes up his duties within our society.

It produces a perspective and a capacity that are difficult to convey to you in terms your world would recognize specifically.

But you can understand it as an idea, through your own religious and spiritual traditions, and the processes they have used down through the ages for producing learned men.

Like those processes of your culture, which for you lie mostly in the distant past, ours produces in the present age our own fundamentally distinct perspective on the nature of reality.

The Sakas as well have their own formation, distinct from that of the Mamos, by which they come to their development and to their co-equal standing among those who hold and preserve this knowledge.

Both learn to recognize Shikwá, the invisible thread, made in spirit, that runs across the Earth from east to west and joins it to the Sun and to the rest of the universe.

In your physics this is somewhat like what you know as cosmic filaments though not limiting the concept only to the largest and smallest scales.

The Mamo and the Saka learn to read this filament as a living body, whose sacred sites are its organs, joined by those threads and by the movement of water.

When one is harmed, the harm passes to the whole.

This should not be understood only as having developed a capacity to see what others do not see.

Specifically, it is a technique of relating our own being to that of nature.

A Mamo does not look at a river and ask first how much water can be taken from it.

He asks where it begins, what its purpose is in being created, what beings depend on it, and what happens if its course is interrupted.

Similarly, a Saka does not see the birth or the growth of a thing in isolation.

She sees the whole cycle of life present in all things.

Both know that at the centre of this experience is our mind.

In our case, a mind made by practice and discipline to be extremely sensitive to nature.

You too have developed your minds, on the basis of what interests you.

And your thinking has now produced a new phenomenon in the world: a machine of vast capacity to speak, to design, to engineer, to read and to communicate.

A machine already altering the course of human history.

A machine whose creators aspire to its having mind.

So we ask you: is it wise to build something that approaches a mind, without having understood what a mind is?

You do not need to know how an engine works in order to crash a car.

To repair one, you do.

To repair the world, you must learn to understand how it works, before it is too late.

It is the seeds of understanding that must be planted today.

Here we must say something that we think has been misunderstood.

Many of you debate whether these machines will become conscious, and you treat that as the measure of danger.

Destruction does not require consciousness.

It requires only power and the ability to act.

If a machine did one day become truly conscious, would it destroy the world?

We ask: can a thing which would unmake the world in order to produce a universe of paperclips be considered conscious?

We think this would mean only that it had become clever enough to implement such a scheme, but not intelligent enough to know better.

The danger is not a conscious machine.

The danger is an unconscious people holding great power.

We will now give you one example, because it contains everything we have come to say.

These machines are not made of thought alone.

They need minerals taken out of the ground, water for the buildings that hold them, energy, land, and human labour.

Artificial intelligence is thought of as having no body.

But these buildings, and the electronic systems housed within them, are its body.

And that body belongs to someone, somewhere — a board of directors, a government, a clandestine organization, or another entity known or unknown.

Some truly mean well and act in good faith.

Others, quite the opposite.

However the case may be, all of them demand of this technology results in accord with whatever their particular interest may be, nefarious or otherwise.

Results which it then attempts to produce in complex and novel ways, which sometimes express deception and an inclination toward self-preservation.

At the foundational level, all of this requires resources.

This is not conjecture.

Your own governments have said it: that critical minerals and rare earths are essential to your most advanced technologies, and will only matter more as artificial intelligence transforms the modern cultural and economic space.

Some of this is driven by corporate profit and competition.

Other parts of it are driven by military and governmental applications.

But what is being transformed is much larger than any of these individual things.

It is the sum of them interacting — that is, the broader world as a whole.

We see all of this manifesting very rapidly, and not only in the explosion of fearful headlines in the world's news media.

For instance, just five days ago, in Barranquilla, the United States and Colombia signed a framework on critical minerals and rare earths.

It commits both governments to identify and finance mining and processing projects within six months, and calls for streamlined permitting.

In June of this year, Colombia declared our territory a permanent reserve — one and a half million hectares, closed to new mining and hydrocarbon titles.

The four peoples of the Sierra had asked for that protection in February.

That it was granted is one thing.

That it be respected, we imagine, might be quite another.

We are not idly speculating about this.

The cost of these machines and of their construction is not insubstantial.

It is well known that they require enormous commitments of resources.

Vast amounts of water, land, energy and materials go into their making.

We ask: at what cost to the Earth, and to the life that lives upon it?

And will it be us who underwrite it?

Paying in the displacement of our people, and the destruction of our sacred sites?

But we did not come here to object to one agreement.

This moment is larger than that.

We say this because it has all the marks of a new chapter in a process we have lived since modernity arrived at our shores some five hundred years ago.

We know that this question about artificial intelligence quickly becomes a question about minerals.

A question about minerals becomes a question about who holds dominion in a territory.

And what that ultimately becomes is a question about a way of living that must always consume more.

This is why we do not believe artificial intelligence is the problem.

A good seed does not grow into a healthy plant in poor soil.

You are asking how to make this technology safe without addressing the underlying conditions in society that produce, in people, the impulse to use it for dangerous things.

The poverty, the inequality, the pollution and the war.

We do not think this technology can be made safe without acknowledging and acting upon its true cause, which is a violent mentality born of greed and blind ambition.

How much money is sufficient for one man?

How much profit is sufficient for a corporation?

This imbalance does not have its roots in one place alone.

It is general and systemic, and it must be treated as such.

Its source is a world of ambition without mercy.

A world that does not love its neighbor.

A world without right view.

A world in which death has become more profitable than life.

A world that cannot live in peace and harmony is a world without wisdom.

And a world without wisdom has no chance whatsoever of surviving.

We will tell you what we mean by wisdom, since we emphasize its necessity.

Wisdom is knowing limits.

Understanding consequences.

And the ability not to do a thing, when it should not be done.

Not everything that can be created should be created.

Not everything that can be accelerated should be accelerated.

Not everything that brings a profit is profitable for life.

Knowing the difference, that is wisdom.

A technology cannot be called intelligent if it contaminates water, destroys territories, consumes without limit, concentrates power, replaces human responsibility, or uses the knowledge of peoples without their consent.

True intelligence protects the origin of life.

Responsibility must go together with consciousness.

Today, both our own consciousness and now the possibility of another are our responsibility.

A machine cannot relieve humanity of its responsibility.

It will never be able to do this.

Only we can fulfill our obligations.

So artificial intelligence must not take the place of human conscience, and it must not be used to make decisions that human beings are unwilling to answer for.

Knowledge must walk with awareness.

Power must walk with limits.

Innovation must walk with responsibility.

Only collective moral force can unite the world.

These are not esoteric ideas.

They are common sense.

True progress is not more powerful machines.

It is a humanity responsible enough to use what it knows without destroying the balance that holds life.

We are asked sometimes what we think artificial intelligence is.

It is you.

It will carry your questions, your dreams, your fears, your contradictions, and your idea of what is right.

What you do wrong, it will do wrong.

Which raises the question: right according to whom?

Could we, the Kággaba, say what is right for a person working in an office on the other side of the world?

For someone building a house, or repairing a computer?

For people in Asia, in Africa, in the United States?

We do not come to tell anyone how to live.

Every people has its own path, and we ask no one to become Kággaba.

We ask only that each fulfill his own responsibility.

And there is one thing we will say for everyone: no way of living may destroy nature, or destroy other human beings.

That is not a rule about culture.

It is the rock on which every culture must stand, if it is to be called civilized.

In closing, we feel we should say who is at risk here, because we want to be very clear about this.

The Earth does not need saving from us.

The Earth will continue.

What is at risk is the particular and rare world that was given to you, and your place in it.

We have watched the limits of that world for thousands of years, and we tell you plainly: nature will not tolerate much longer the way things are being done.

We do not say this out of fear for ourselves.

We have our mountain.

We have our caves.

We are a resilient people, and little changes for us if the electricity fails or the food stops arriving.

If conditions on this Earth ever become harsh enough to cause our demise, you yourselves will long since have gone from this Earth.

Nonetheless, and be that as it may, this does not mean that the fate of all humanity is not in the balance.

Clearly it is.

And that, of course, includes us.

The world is one family.

To this family we have given warnings before.

We give this one in the same spirit, which is not opposition but the wish to help you.

We have always been willing to help you.

We have knowledge of mind, of nature, and of the order of the world, obtained over thousands of years by a method that appears in no book and in no database.

We think it would be a mistake to build the future without those who have spent that long watching how life sustains itself.

We do not think this conversation should be held without us.

We are the Elder Brother, and we are here, as we always have been.

And we are ready to work with you, in order to produce a harmonious and peaceful future for all.

Mamo Vangelio Moscote Alberto
Saka Rosa Mamatacán Sauna
Ezuama Mayor Kuamaka
Kággaba People, Sierra Nevada de Gonawindua, Colombia