

Twelve Bearded Men

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (January 2025)



Kogi Indians, Columbia

My security detail from the Moroccan police showed up at my door before sunset on Friday afternoon. He and I do not speak much. He knows the route down the mountainside, past some of the beautiful, almost palatial Moorish mansions that can be found on the higher heights of Tangier, populated by an ever-changing jet set of pop stars, actors, and rich Europeans. The latest gossip was that Sophia Loren, the Italian actress, and femme fatale was visiting Tangier and staying in one of these palaces.

It was a cloudy and misty late afternoon, and the mist often occluded the view but just as often the mist would dissipate,

you could see the port and the sea and the mountains of Spain on the other side of the straight of Gibraltar. It is a sight which always lifts my spirits and reminds me that this was once Hercules stomping ground where he found the apples from the Garden of the Hesperides.

The two of us walked down the path, Lahcen puffing on his cigarette which ensured that I could see him when it got misty, the end of his lit cigarette reminding me of a firefly. Then the mist would pass, and I could see him again in his overcoat.

Most of the path down the mountain side is unpaved until you reach the old Casbah of Tangier. There it started getting noisy quite quickly as the afternoon call to prayer was blasted from every mosque and minaret in that crowded part of town.

None of the muezzins' call to prayer were coordinated so it was like an Avant Garde performance of the same melody set off at different moments. A unique part of the sonic landscape that one must become accustomed to when one lives in a Muslim Arab city. The composer John Cage would have been happy here.

Lahcen had his earphone on and was in touch with police agents on either side of our route. He would speak into a small speaker attached to his tie. "Kulshi mezyan, safi," he would repeat in Moroccan Arabic. Everything is good, everything is fine

There were no signs of danger, and we arrived shortly thereafter at the Nahshon Synagogue where we had managed to assemble ten Jews to make up the minyan, the minimum number of adult Jewish men that is necessary for proper prayer in a Jewish synagogue especially on the eve of the Sabbath.

The evening service was short and by that time I had memorized

the prayers. We put away our prayer books and prayer shawls and walked over to one of the houses that still belonged to the community for our evening dinner. Lahcen waited outside, ever on the alert, sipping from the large pot of green mint tea that we had provided for him and munching on candied gazelle horns.

We sat down for an evening of Moroccan food served on round copper trays, washed down with Israeli wine and Kosher beer from Jerusalem. That night we had been blessed with a new visitor.

His name was Aharon Montecinos. He was a Sephardi Jew from Colombia in South America. There he ran an eco-trekking company off the port town of Cartagena on the coast.

He was in his forties, sported a full dark beard that made him look a bit like Cortez, the conqueror of Mexico. He wore black rimmed glasses, wore a dinner jacket with leather patches on the elbows like a professor at a liberal arts college. He had longish curly black hair that almost reached his shoulders and that he parted down the middle of his scalp.

He had a calm demeanor and spoke carefully as he was fluent in Spanish, French, English and Hebrew as he had once spent a summer on a Kibbutz Ulpan (language school), picking fruit in the morning and studying Hebrew in the afternoon

Montecinos came from a solidly middle-class family. His mother was a Ladino speaking Sephardic Jew from Boston, whose family had come to America from Istanbul, decades earlier and she who had fallen in love with all things Colombian, including its Jewish community.

As she made a living teaching English in a local college it was simply a matter of time until some romantic young member of the Jewish community would take an interest in this "exotic" creature from gringoland, although her looks allowed her to fit in seamlessly with Colombian society and once she

had mastered the local dialect, its idioms and body language she could pass as native born.

Coming from outside, her personal library was filled with scores of books in English and Spanish about all and every aspect of the New World including its Jewish communities.

Aharon's father Samuel was more practical than his mother. He wanted stability, a good job, respect and enough money to maintain a middle-class existence for his son and Aharon's younger daughter Violetta and so he had become a water engineer, often bagging contracts from the World Bank or USAID that took him deep into the Cordillera mountains of rural Colombia, providing new irrigation technology to formerly subsistence based peasants or "campesinos" as they are called in Spanish.

Samuel was loved and appreciated by the campesinos whom he came to deal with and even some of the Indigenous Indian tribes who prevent outsiders from visit and who still lived in the interior, like the Kogi.

Despite his apparent solemnity, Aharon had a humorous side and a winning smile. He knew how to ask questions about people in a way that made them more comfortable. He was curious but not nosy.

I asked him about his work and what brought him to Morocco. His answer was clear and articulate, "My mother is crazy about all things Colombian and so by the time I was in university I majored in ethnography and geography. I got a scholarship and wrote an MA on explorers and conquistadors in 17th century Columbia. I could have gone on to get a PhD, but I stopped because I was tired of depending on my parents and living on a graduate student's stipend.

"And so, taking a leaf from my father's playbook I opened my

own company, "Trekking with Aharon." I created podcasts and videos of my trips to remote non touristed parts of Colombia. I worked out equitable arrangements with farmers and shepherds so that we paid them as guides, paid them to put up our tents in their compounds, and bought food from them.

"We give the community a lump sum for schools and clinics that allows my clients to take pictures freely and within reason. Yes, it is what they call "eco-tourism," and it works.

"I got to know rural Columbia inside out and I have made a decent living from it. I am now on holiday here in Morocco and I intend to trek through the Atlas mountains with members of the Club Alpiniste Francais or CAF.

"I want to see the multi storied Berber kasbahs of these mountains and hear some Berber folk music which on record sounds so much like the music of the Andes, especially the Aymara and Quechua Indians who descend from the Incas."

I asked him about the Kogi as I had read about them in graduate school. The celebrated Austrian born Colombian anthropologist Reichel Dolmatoff had lived among them, learnt their language, and gained their trust. He had written a classic ethnography which we read with our professors.

Aharon continued, "As you have said, you have read Dolmatoff. As he did his work decades ago you would think that like so many Indigenous peoples in South America, the Kogi now own computers and dress like Westerners, but this has not happened. The Kogi have absolutely rejected what we call progress and the modern world. They are adamant about this.

"First the Kogi live in a remote mountain wilderness. There are no ways to get there by car, jeep, or boat. You must trek in with all your supplies. There are no telephone wires or cell phones that work in their homeland. They do not let many people visit them. There are no schools.

"I can only bring in clients if they promise not to bring in cameras and then we only meet the elders on the outskirts of the village. That is only because my father helped them with a technologically simple irrigation innovation that only uses local materials. Otherwise we would not have stood a chance. None of the other trekking and mountaineering groups have even tried. They are politely puzzled at how a Colombian Jew manages to pull this off. It is from their good will towards my father.

"Second, the Kogi all dress in white and they are quiet people. They have their own religion, their own mythology, ritual cycle, unique social organization, and stone structures where they perform ancient rituals. Their music is beautiful and haunting.

"Yes, over the generations individual Kogi have left their villages and come to the Pacific coast as day laborers, but they always return, and they are not impressed by what they see.

"They know that we live fast paced existences, that we live in societies with much inequality, that we fight wars with horrible modern weapons, get drunk, cut down the forest and extract oil from underground. They have a low opinion of progress and modernity and prefer to live according to the ancient rhythms of their culture. As their land is rich and the forest is filled with wild fruits, wild animals, and potent medicines, they lack little.

"They believe, and they are correct that we are destroying a good part of the planet-just look what they are doing to the Amazon forest in nearby Brazil, and you cannot disagree with them. They call the rest of us the "younger brothers." They call themselves the "elder brothers" and they believe they have something to teach us.

"In addition to joining my father's visits to them as a

teenager and my later eco-tourism, I was hired by the BBC to be their site manager and liaison for documentary films that they did on the Kogi, for the Kogi understand how TV works and they believe that this will spread their message of wholeness more widely.

“There is only one thing that I cannot figure out about them. First whenever I am with them, they insist on calling me “Jefe” or chief. I have no authority of any kind and at best, I am first among equals during my treks.

“Second, as they know I am Jewish they insist that I do no work of any kind on the Sabbath and they are only comfortable when they see me pray on Saturday morning with my kippa, prayer shawl and siddur. I do this to make them happy, but it makes me wonder.”

The conversation began to meander. The world stock market was doing very well. The Israeli shekel was gaining on the dollar as the high tech start ups were beginning to affect the macro-economic status of the state of Israel. Hamas and Hezbollah were taking pot shots at the border while Assad’s police state in Syria had collapsed due to the resolute work of the Israeli army.

But the Kurds were losing control of Northern Iraq to the Arabs of the south, which made us all depressed as we had all hoped for an independent Kurdistan. The Olympics were being held in Bulgaria and this was bringing millions of dollars into that depressed economy, but the delays in construction were causing the sporting (and the betting) world to go wild. And of course the Russians were making a mess of the Ukraine and cozying up to the Iranians and North Koreans in the process. However with the election of Trump that may change.

Morocco was quiet, it was overrun with mass tourism during the spring and summer and its ambivalent relationship with the State of Israel and the Jewish people was ebbing and flowing.

As we got up to go back to our respective houses and hotels, and over a few glasses of Israeli cognac, Aharon added to his tale:

“The craziest thing that ever happened to me was when after the BBC crew had begun to return to the coast with my team the elders asked me to stay a few hours and catch up with my group later in the day when they made their first stop to camp.

“The Kogi elders had me sit in a circle and after about ten minutes of silence they said to me, “We are still waiting for twelve bearded men. Your ancestors promised they would bring them to us, and it has not happened. It is now upon you to fulfill their promise.”

“Everyone from dinner just shrugged and said something like, “Twelve bearded men, what is that supposed to mean? It sounds like the punchline to some piece of American Jewish humor.”

We said goodbye and told Aharon to contact us after his two-week trek among the Berber tribes of the Atlas. Ozziel lent him his Berber Spanish dictionary and phrase book. Aharon thanked him warmly.

Days later I was lounging in the courtyard of my house. I was sitting on a carpet drinking tea and watching the Moorish fountain. Somehow my housekeeper Amina had left some pumpkin seeds in the fountain, and I watched the pigeons as they dive bombed into the water to liberate this wonderful food. Then they were gone and all you could hear was the rushing water.

Someone was banging on the main door with a walking stick. I immediately recognized it as belonging to Ozziel the head of the dwindling community of Jewish Tangier, a friend to me and a supporter of the State of Israel and its special relationship, often clandestine, with the family of the King of this country.

I pulled up two wicker chairs. Amina, my housekeeper, offered

Ozziel some candied gazelle horns. With a smile and in staccato local Arabic he told her that he must reduce his sugar intake so instead she brought him a piece of just out of the oven Moroccan bread that she had just picked up from the baker down the street. We shared it and I allowed myself to add some butter and honey.

After general chit chat that included a high-profile visit to Tangier by the aging but ever attractive Italian movie star Sophia Loren, with whom Uzziel just had to have had a one-on-one dinner as he had connections in the European film industry, he told me just how beautiful and enchanting she still was.

He sighed and said, "If I were just twenty years younger?" I said "But you and her are the same age!" "Yes," he said, "If I was twenty years younger, she would be twenty years younger too and that would have been a lot of fun." You just could not stop Ozziel.

Suddenly he got serious and asked me what I thought of Montecinos. "Well," I said, "I like South American Jews. They know who they are. They do not pretend to be anything else. They are fluent in Hebrew by the time they finish high school, and many of them come to Israel. They give and they do not take and when Jews come from abroad to visit them in their own home communities, they make you feel welcome in a way that only Latinos know how to do. They make you feel truly at home away from home."

"Yes, that is true," said Ozziel. "But what about the twelve bearded men, did not that make you curious?"

"Actually," I said, "I was not paying that much attention. Indigenous people are poetic and often use metaphor more than we do to express themselves. "

Ozziel smiled and spoke. "I am a bit disappointed with your answer. Do you remember who Manasseh Ben Israel was?"

"Yes," I answered, "the 17th century Dutch Rabbi who was born a New Christian, made it to Amsterdam and died two years before his request to Cromwell of England to let the Jews return to the British isles came to pass."

"Exactly" said Ozziel. He then added, "One can easily conclude that after just under four hundred years the communication from a dying Jew in Columbia to an esteemed Rabbi in Amsterdam changed the course of Jewish history."

Now listen to this," and he began to read to me from a book published in 2009 called [Ten Lost Tribes](#) by an American based Israeli born professor of Kurdish descent. Ozziel read the following in his slightly accented British style English.

One boiling day in the summer of 1647a deathbed was brought into the synagogue at Recife. Upon it lay a man in his mid-forties, Aharon ha Levi, better known as Antonio Montezinos, taking an oath that all that he had told over the past years was true. The people around the bed, all former "New Christians," had taken refuge from the horrors of the Iberian Inquisition in this new colony, where they were able to return to Judaism. They were taking notes which they planned to send back to Amsterdam, Montezinos last residence before coming to Recife, then briefly under Dutch rule. The scene at the Synagogue was to resolve any remaining doubts about Montezinos's story: the Talmud says that a man on his deathbed does not lie. Montezinos had a fabulous story to tell.

And so Ozziel started to paraphrase. "Montezinos was in his early forties when he passed away, I am guessing that he died from malaria or one of the many tropical diseases that you can pick up in the lowlands of South America, especially if you are a trader and move around you will discover that America is

different from Eurasia. It has a north south axis of rivers and highlands and so you are always going up and down if you try and travel north south. It is also one of the reasons that the native peoples were so different as they were often quite isolated, and this isolation contributed to their cultural uniqueness. And so anyone coming from outside could be thought of as sacred or cursed. But more on that later.

He was born in Portugal around 1604, and his family were definitely secret Jews who had maintained their faith and the basic rituals of Judaism for over a century, ever since King Manuel I of Portugal had forced the remaining Jews of his country to convert to Catholicism in a decree that he made in 1497.

And so it was common for the children and grandchildren of these secret Jews who were publicly labelled "New Christians" to try and get as far away from the Inquisition as possible. In most cases the Americas were the place to do it for there a man could easily reinvent or remake himself in an image that would not draw the Inquisition after him.

When Antonio was a young man who left for the West Indies and ended up as a trader in the highlands of what is now Columbia and Ecuador, trading the manufactured goods of Spain for the raw materials of the Indians amidst a growing number of mestizos who were often the Spanish speaking deracinated descendants of unions between Conquistadores and indigenous Indians.

Today historians believe that these New Christians dominated the early Atlantic trade networks of the Spanish and Portuguese Empires in the New World. They really did not have much of a choice in the matter for staying in Europe often meant being denounced by a neighbour who felt 'fully Catholic' and who would make sure you were imprisoned by the Inquisition, tortured, and then often burnt at the stake. In that case they would often inherit your possessions.

The Spanish and later Portuguese Catholics become so obsessed with making sure that only full blood Catholic and Portuguese Spaniards had authority in their empire that they engaged lineage specialists to make and maintain complex kinship charts that were kept up for centuries so that the authorities could distinguish those subjects whose blood was "pure" and therefore loyal to the Crown and those who were suspect, and who still had the taint of "Jewish blood" in them. It was not a great time to be Jewish.

These Jewish traders had a natural sympathy with the native peoples such as the Mayans who had been conquered and diminished by their conquering Spanish overlords. To trade they often learnt the local Indian languages and functioned as bridges from persecuted to persecutor. Added to the fact that these traders who were often young, single men like Antonio, they could maintain in relative obscurity never staying in one place long enough to be thoroughly investigated or caught out by Church or State.

It began during one of his trading expeditions. Montezinos found himself in highland Colombia among the Kogi or some tribe like them, who were still living in their non-Catholic culture and society. During this trip he met up with a personable Indian by the name of Francisco.

The other Indian porters looked up to him and called him "chief" or jefe in Spanish. What caught Montezinos attention was Francisco's bitterness about the Spanish overlords.

He made no bones about them. He explained that they came to his lands without women and so stole wives and concubines from his people. Then they demanded that they give up their old beliefs on pain of death and were partially enslaved and forced to work on the farms and plantations of the conquerors. But he had hope and he kept telling Montesinos that the Spanish would one day be punished by a "hidden people" who had come from far away and who had made their home among his and

neighbouring people.

On the next expedition Francisco and Montezinos went into the mountains alone. After a few days Montezinos turned to Francisco and said, "I am a Hebrew from the tribe of Levi and my God is the Lord God and all the rest is just a disguise." Francisco interrogated Montezinos thoroughly and at the end of it declared Montezinos to be a true son of Israel and so he promised to take him somewhere important.

They then traveled through the remote mountains for a couple of weeks and each time the Sabbath came, Francisco insisted they stop, do no work and he asked Montezinos to recite the Shema, the basic prayer of Judaism, 'Hear oh Israel the Lord Our God the Lord is One.'

They finally arrived at a broad river and were met by a canoe carrying three men and a woman, all dressed in white robes. Each one embraced Montezinos and recited the Shema as they did so.

They sat by the river's edge and told Montezinos that they were Israelites and that they were preparing to come out into the world and take revenge on the Spaniards who had so cruelly persecuted the Jews and their neighbouring Indians among whom they now lived in peace. They did not, however, let him cross the river and meet most of their coreligionists.

They did ask for Montezinos to return if and only if he could bring twelve bearded men who knew the Torah and could teach their children the ways of their ancestors.

On their way back Francisco said, 'Know that your brothers the Children of Israel, God brought them to this land, he did miracles and wonders there.' Then he explained that his own Indian ancestors had fought with the Israelites but in the end, they made common cause and vowed to live in peace."

I remembered from a graduate course I had taken in Jewish

history that Montesinos death bed confession was related to Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel in Amsterdam, and he included it in his Messianic inspired book [The Hope of Israel](#) which was translated into Latin and forwarded to Cromwell. Ben Israel's argument was simple. For the Jews, the fact that the Israelites now were spread to every continent meant that the Jewish Messiah may soon come if they would also be allowed to settle in England.

For the Christians, it meant that the Jews being dispersed around the world must all be dispersed in England so they could all be converted to Christianity and trigger the second coming.

Culturally and historically, Montesinos story set the foundation for what later became the Restorationist Movement in England and America which believed that all Jews must first return to the land of Israel before they convert and trigger the second coming.

Eventually this movement met up with modern Zionism giving birth to the Balfour Declaration, the Mandate for Palestine, and an independent Jewish State in the land of Israel."

Ozziel looked at me and said, "I have finished. I have laid it out in full. What do you think?"

I was stunned and could not speak. Hassan my house servant was sitting in the corner of the courtyard in his turban and woolen jellabiya that made him look like a medieval monk. He was smoking his sebsi, the long pipe for kif or marijuana and my eyes fixated on the curlicues of smoke that slowly wafter upwards. My mind was in such a jumble that his pipe smoke made me think of the moving mist which had made Lahcen appear and reappear on my walk down to the Synagogue the night I met Aharon.

The first thing I said to Ozziel was, "Do you think that this Francisco was a Kogi Indian? Ozziel paused and said, "Well he

and Montezinos were in the right place at the right time and the Kogi have a phenomenal memory that allows them to keep their culture alive. In that sense, although illiterate, they have done as good a job as we Jews have done in keeping our culture alive in a world that just does not like us."

"What about the twelve bearded men?" I said. Ozziel laughed and answered, "You know Rabbis have been rather distinctive looking during the last four hundred years"

We sat there quietly, and it dawned on me that Montezinos would be back from his trek in the Atlas in a few days and would come to the Synagogue and join us for Friday dinner. I suddenly asked Ozziel, "Are you going to share this story with Aharon?"

He paused and said quite slowly and seriously said, "I am not sure. It is hard enough to be a Kogi. I am not sure that by revealing to them that they are also Jewish would be a blessing during this turbulent time for our people.

And on top of that, where are we going to find twelve bearded Rabbis who agree with one another? That is a tough quest. We must solve that one first."

And then he got up out of his chair and was gone.

[Table of Contents](#)

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