12.
Nashira

Building a New Matriarchal Society in Colombia Based on the Gift Economy

ANGELA DOLMETSCH

GIFT GIVING IS PART OF OUR DAILY LIVES. Mothers respond to the needs of their babies, who cannot survive without all that they receive from their mothers. In contrast to the exchange economy whose basis is buying and selling, the gift economy depends on making the best use of the gifts from Mother Nature (Vaughan). Based on this paradigm, the Nashira eco-village in Palmira, Colombia, was built twelve years ago.

In the first century AD in the Cauca River Valley in what is now Colombia, there lived a community that is believed to have adhered to matriarchal principles and worshipped an earth mother figure and many female deities (Cardale *et al.*). This Malagana culture was only discovered seventeen years ago when a sugar cane worker accidentally uncovered a gold figure. He had discovered a remarkable hoard of ceramic and gold artefacts, very different in character from other Indigenous cultures previously discovered in the region (Cardale *et al.*). The gold pieces were of exceptional beauty, and experts have recognized their quality by comparing them to objects found in the tomb of Tutankhamun (Cardale *et al.*).

The objects discovered included gold artefacts depicting the birth of a child. The ceramics were mostly female figures and amongst them were *alcarrazas* or drinking vessels with double spouts in the shape of houses and female breasts, quite distinct from any seen before in other pre-Columbian cultures. Archeologists believe the Malagana culture, with its remarkable artistic talents, only lasted a few centuries, and that it was superseded by the Yotoco culture, a warring society that extended its influence by conquest over a large area. The Malagana culture or *Kansaterwa* was believed to be matriarchal and practiced a version of the gift economy (Cardale *et al.*).

In Colombia, thirty-two per cent of households are headed by

women and depend on their work as the principal source of income (Uniandes).

As a result of the gender structure of Colombian society, high male mortality rates due to fifty years of civil war, massive displacement of rural communities, and endemic violence, women are frequently responsible for family care including their elderly relatives and children. In Colombia, sadly 72.5 per cent of homes with women as heads of households live below the poverty line. Women with little or no formal education have a difficult time finding work, and there is little or no state welfare system to protect the unemployed, or aid for families with dependent children. Most of the women in Nashira work through the day cleaning houses, washing, and ironing clothes. Many were formerly obliged to work as caretakers of empty farms without pay other than a roof over their heads. What better place can there be to put into practice the gift economy?

Near Palmira in the village of El Bolo in Colombia on three hectares of donated land, 88 women heads of families, victims of the Colombian conflict, have built a sustainable and productive eco-village called Nashira (Sauter-Bailliet). They produce their own organic food and specialize in activities such as plantain growing, noni fruit products, manufacturing of ceramic ware, a solar restaurant, chicken rearing, and the collecting and recycling of trash. Significantly and symbolically, Nashira is constructed on the principles of the gift economy, and is located in precisely the same area as the recently discovered Malagana or Kansatewra Culture. The Colombian government, through the subsidy program "Policy for Rural Housing," provided the funds for environmentally-friendly building materials such as prefabricated panels made from recycled building debris. The women themselves built their houses under professional supervision. A great benefit and part of the gift economy is that when the families move into the houses, the women heads of families do not have the burden of mortgage payments, and are able in many cases to work at home.

The social organization of the women of Nashira is very important. Decisions are taken by consensus and the tasks of looking after children and maintaining the eco-village are done through "mingas" or community work. Boys and girls are encouraged to develop maternal feelings and unplanned teenage pregnancies—a constant problem in developing countries—have been dramatically reduced through a program of sexual education. Equally importantly, there have been several cases of domestic violence in which men who abused their wives were expelled from the eco-village. These decisions are taken

and enforced by a *comite de convivencia* (co-existence committee) that is elected by the women themselves.

By applying the principles of the gift economy to their daily life, and by following a matriarchal practice, the women of Nashira have developed a unique project where solidarity and maternal love have contributed to a sustainable community. The overall administration is in the hands of an elected board of twenty women and one man. The Board includes an elected Internal Coordinator, who is one of the founders. Other members include the External Coordinator (a young woman who is the daughter of a founding member, and who has been raised in Nashira), a Treasurer and a Secretary. The eleven productive units are also represented on the Board. Further, young people are also represented as there are six seats for the sons or daughters of the founders under the age of thirty (Sauter-Bailliet). Visitors are welcome to stay at the women's houses and participate in the different activities that take place in the village, such as making handmade paper, glass cutting, making ceramics, learning to make toys from recycled items, permaculture, and learning how to building walls using empty plastic bottles.

Colombia is in the process of concluding a peace process with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) (Acosta). After 65 years of civil war, Colombian society needs to be reinvented by creating communities of peace. There will be at least 15,000 ex-combatants and hundreds of thousands of displaced families returning to the small towns and farms from which they were expelled over many decades (Acosta). A new model of society where peace prevails, based on various paradigms, is needed to create peace and prevent another war. The mistakes of other peace processes must be avoided. The gang violence that has disfigured Central America, particularly in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and the appalling statistics of rape and murder in South Africa are a reminder that wars do not necessarily end with the signing of a peace treaty (Dolmetsch). Employment opportunities are vital, and the principles of the gift economy can make an important contribution to this. Matriarchal communities such as Nashira are one way for that dream to come true. We need Nashira to be successful.

What is Nashira missing to be considered a gift economy community? Although the community is almost self-sufficient, electricity has to be acquired commercially through the exchange economy of the patriarchal capitalist system (which is expensive for poor people particularly), and water has to be pumped from an artesian well. The obvious next step is to liberate the community by investing in solar energy.

Nashira for a better world. The future is in the hands of those who dream and have the courage to make their dreams come true.

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