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Making Peace with the Earth—The Diplomatic Turn: A Special Cluster



Zhigoneshi: A Culture of Connection

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Zhigoneshi: A Culture of Connection

by Alan Ereira and Luci Attala



Abstract

Zhigoneshi describes the symbiotic dependencies that weave together to produce the world. The Kogi concept of mutuality, as expressed in their word zhigoneshi, conveys a picture of life as a series of collaborative, cooperative relationships, which the Kogi understand as axiomatic to all living processes, including human societies. This is evident in relation to their vertical mountain economy and in their view of exchange. Consequently, for the Kogi, materials, knowledge and thought are not simply connected but are also fundamentally entwined. This approach does not simply describe ecological dependencies; it also holds that economic and biological life existentially inform each other and therefore cannot be separated, even in thought. Chiming with the reality of cellular symbiotic practices at the very origins of life (as articulated by Margulis), zhigoneshi rejects the notion of the self-interested in pursuit of accumulation and profit, as employed by capitalist economic methods, in favor of actions that understand connectivity and ensure balance and harmony are maintained. Using numerous cultural examples, we illustrate how many alternative ideas of economy continue to inform current exchange practices out from the market and suggest that these examples provide a useful understanding of post-capitalist possibilities in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Kogi, exchange, mutuality, symbiosis, profit, reciprocity



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Zhigoneshi: A Culture of Connection

Alan Ereira and Luci Attala

*Why is the earth failing? Because they have plundered so much, petrol, oil, coal, and have torn out the minerals, ripped out the Mothers, that is why it will fail.
Because of all this pillaging the sun itself will go out. When the earth ends everything will stop, the fires, the benches, the stones, everything. It will all end.*
—Mama Valencia

The Kogi, indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia, describe the correct way of relating to each other and to all life as “*zhigoneshi*.” It is at the heart of their cosmography.

“Zhi” conveys agreement. “Go” means being born or formed, “ne” signifies moving outwards (“go-ne” can indicate “has done”) and “shi” is a word for thread and connection.¹ Like other multisyllabic terms in their language, this is not so much a word as a narrative. *Zhigoneshi* is not individual activity, but an account of engagement and participation in and for a wider world.

The term was first reported in print in the early 1990s after they made their first public statement, a feature-length documentary on the BBC’s premier channel. That film, *From the Heart of the World: The Elder Brothers’ Warning* (1990a), created something of a sensation. Grave, white-robed elders of a South American mountain civilization, consciously isolating for centuries in virtually inaccessible regions of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, announced that they had avoided engagement with our language, religion, technology, and mode of life for four hundred years to insulate themselves and maintain ancestral knowledge and action. They had done that in order to take care of the world by their traditional work. But now their effort was failing.

When the Spanish had first landed at the mountain's foot in 1514, they were confronted by the urbanized Tairona people. The Spanish commander, Davila, proclaimed that "God our Father, the one and the trinity, created the skies and the earth, and a man and a woman, of whom you and we and all the men of this world are descendants and offspring." The Kogi disagree. They say that the Great Mother conceived two forms of human, Elder Brothers from which the indigenous are descended and who have the duty of caring for the world, and Younger Brothers, whose ancestors behaved dangerously and were expelled "across the sea."

Eventually they returned, starting with Columbus, still acting as before, damaging what the Kogi call "the heart of the world."

These Spanish colonists ruthlessly destroyed the rich Tairona civilization in 1599. Today's Kogi are descended from survivors who withdrew to barely accessible valleys, aware of the outside world but virtually unseen. They took care of their mountain, the heart of the world, under the supervision of trained experts called Mamas (a word for the sun), who taught that they were also healing damage done elsewhere. But in the 1980s "development" and peasant farmers encroached. The Kogi saw ecological change and concluded that damage from industrialization was now overwhelming. Their effort to cut themselves off and live in safe isolation had failed in its prophylactic purpose. The last hope was to reveal themselves, authenticate themselves and issue a warning.

That is when they began to speak of *zhigoneshi*, collaborative co-operation, the mutual exchange necessary for living entities to prosper. The invaders had come to plunder; and contact had been very dangerous, but it was now imperative to try to work together. They balanced the risk that their exposure might result in their destruction against the certainty of extinction, the end of life itself, if Younger Brother continues on his path. The risk had to be taken, collaboration had to be sought. The Mamas observed that Younger Brother has a complimentary form of knowledge to their own, knowledge of machines. They spoke of two potential futures. In one, their "younger brothers" will complete the conquest started by Columbus, ignore the indigenous knowledge in their message and use their machines to extinguish the life of the world. In the other, the warning will be understood, and the siblings, using their complimentary forms of knowledge cooperatively, avert catastrophe.

Acting without awareness of the needs of the living world is, they are certain, causing deep-seated or, potentially, fatal damage. Now that "younger brother" recognizes powerful evidence of the Anthropocene and a climate emergency, the Kogis' risk assessment seems to have gained credibility. Could *Zhigoneshi* save the world?

The Necessity of Exchange

The Kogi understand all life, including their own, to be dynamically involved in relationships and interchanges. *Zhigoneshi* is a process, and to them it is axiomatically the basis of existence, necessary to sustain the complex balance of life. This concept does not articulate a human exceptionalist focus but employs an understanding that all aspects of the material world are inextricably referential, tangled and inter-dependent. Their steep massif imposes the laws of interdependency by which its inhabitants live and teaches people cultivating land at different altitudes to understand this. The Sierra is the world's highest coastal mountain, an isolated triangular pyramid rising 5,200 meters above the Caribbean. Its three steep and deeply corrugated faces, each about 150 km along the base, are etched with river valleys that descend from glaciated snow peaks. Their micro-climates are determined by orientation (one side of the Sierra faces the sea, another faces desert and the third, jungle) and by elevation as they fall to the tropics just 11 degrees north of the equator. Crops and resources, flora and fauna vary according to location, and Kogi families move between as many as five houses at different places to cultivate maize, cotton, fruits, coca, sugar, and lately coffee. They are constantly on the move, walking up and down the rugged slopes, bags of heavy produce carried on their backs with a forehead strap. They live as farmers and porters, continually moving crops and necessities between their communities. Colonial descriptions of the Tairona referred to these exchanges as "trade," but these people have no history of trade. There is no currency, no market system, and even among families hardly any formalized exchange is carried out (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1982). Instead, they have *zhigoneshi*. They still do. It is the basis of the economy of the mountain, and the Kogi describe their journeys as a form of weave, re-tracing the threads of life which connect the massif, in their eyes a living body, to their own.

Everything corporeal is described as the trace of an idea in the cosmic mind, *Aluna*, so it is thought that is exchanged. Food and resources are exchanged in *Aluna* and in substance to sustain the human and non-human life of the Sierra, but when speaking of *zhigoneshi* engaging Younger Brother, the emphasis is on the exchange of ideas. They are well aware of the difference between our mental landscapes, and the TV film was only the first of a series of attempts to bring about that co-operative engagement. With that purpose, their more literate Elder Brother neighbors, the Arhuaco or Ika, created a short lived journal, a print version of their spoken messages, called *Zhigoneshi*. The Kogi then assembled a library of visual and published material produced by Younger Brother about themselves and called that *Zhigoneshi*, and created their own film and video project with the same title run by an Arhuaco, Amado Villafana.

They feel responsible for failing to communicate effectively that co-operative work and exchange is essential. They have knowledge to offer but its functional value is not

being recognized, only being regarded as having mystical or spiritual interest. The reality, though, is that they have a good deal of practical importance to say about sharing and exchange in economic and environmental management.

First There was Symbiosis

At the time of writing, the pandemic rages and the Elder Brothers have shut themselves away in their high valleys. They hide from the infection carried by Younger Brother, refusing social distancing and offers of vaccine which they believe would not have the same effect on them as us. To the extent that we are descended from ancestors with different natures, they can see us as biologically different. But they no longer believe in living wholly apart. They want to defend and have exclusive use of their territory, but simultaneously recognize that we need to share this world. That means Younger and Elder Brother are going to have to work together. A slap in the face administered to Younger Brother on TV will not stop the destruction. The Kogi know they must demonstrate how to understand reality.

It helps that confidence in Darwin's "survival of the fittest" axiom is being lost. He and Herbert Spencer believed it also explained economic growth with nature rewarding winners in cultural and economic conflict. That model now looks flawed in economics as it has been outmoded in biology. In 1967, when Lynn Margulis, an American biologist, suggested that life developed not through nature selecting winners but through symbiosis, different species profiting from sharing the same biological structure, a new set of ideas about how life prospers was provided (Sagan and Margulis 1988, 37; Margulis 1998; Sheldrake 2020, 90). She argued that living creatures did not evolve as separate species but developed from composite life forms that allied with and inhabited each other. She demonstrated through DNA that the energy-producing parts of living cells, called mitochondria, are descended from free-living bacteria. This means that all animal and plant species, despite appearances, are not individuals but should be more accurately thought of as hybrid, entities or biomes composed of multiple cells living inside other cells with different ancestry. This led Margulis and James Lovelock to co-develop the Gaia hypothesis, the idea that all dynamic processes on Earth are symbiotically linked making the planet comparable to a single living organism (Margulis and Lovelock 1974; Lovelock 1979).

This connects to a *zhigoneshi*-based understanding of the world. In place of competition, organic life is now seen to be rooted in co-operation and mutuality. The Kogi understand the proper relationship between humanity and the earth as symbiotic, a mutual dependency. Organic life is founded on the benefits of mutual exchange, rather than the mercantilist belief that one party profits at another's expense. Margulis'

endosymbiotic theory (1967; 1998)² led to the realization that totally unrelated species can acquire fully-evolved abilities from each other. That is how plants developed the ability to photosynthesize energy from light: creatures that could not do this combined with creatures that could, and now the combined beings cannot live apart. For just one beautiful example of many, bobtail squids depend on luminescence for camouflage, which they receive from bioluminescent bacteria which live in them. In a sense, both species inhabit a shared body and use it for their protection, but they remain autonomous (Kiers and West 2015). In Merlin Sheldrake's words, "distant branches of the tree of life entwine and melt into an inseparable new lineage; they fuse" (2020, 92).

The Kogi call that central transcendent and substantial Cosmic Tree *Kaxbusánkua*. The circulation of its vital flows allow thought and maintain life. In this way, the roots collect the strength of the earth, while its branches interact with the air and the sky, exchanging these forces. The shape and the ecological function of trees is a characteristic of their cosmological structure, and the exchanges they empower are the essence of mutuality (Parra Witte 2020). This unifies ecological balance with economic life. A sustainable economy is not Darwinian.

Exchange Value v. Trade Value

Indigenous understanding is regularly presented as beautiful whilst simultaneously naive. It is often judged simplistic and unrealistic in the complicated geo-political climate that mobilizes our shared worlds. The Kogi message therefore, while appreciated by many and used by environmentalists to advertise their own messages, is only referenced by business leaders in terms of PR (Wahlquist 2020). The profit-driven contrivance by which we trade resources, goods and services, and which requires currency, appears to Younger Brother to be axiomatic to the functioning of society, and necessary for the tangled requirements of the vast urban populations dependent on the services provided by global cities.

But until the Spanish arrived, American cities and empires operated at least as successfully as Europe's without a market economy. Pre-Colombian America had no currency and the Kogi know from their own experience, and the evidence and memory of their ancestral remains, that extensive exchanges went on without money, merchants, or profit. Their ancestors shared produce between towns linked by well-engineered stone roads, and exported commodities including elite luxuries and manufactures to people as far away as Venezuela, the Caribbean islands, and Costa Rica. This linked them with many other communities, including central Panama and the Maya (Dahlin et al. 2007).

Exchange is a transfer of ownership, and it happens because people see value and purpose in it. Younger Brother expresses part of that value and purpose in the allegory of “money,” which makes it simple for a trader acting as an intermediary to hold on to part of the exchange as “profit.” That profit often becomes the purpose of the transaction. But in some places people did, and still do, conduct exchange over long distances without any notion of currency, price or calculation of profit. That seems so peculiar as to be absurd (Graeber 2011, 33).

Enlightenment economists’ ideas have persuaded many that economies operate through competition driven by self-interested citizens. Looked at through the lens of *zhigoneshi*, that notion appears the true absurdity. Classical and neo-classical economists have created a caricature of humanity as *homo economicus*, the “economic human” motivated only by a supposed rational desire to maximize personal gain through buying and selling. Margaret Thatcher’s famous statement in 1987 that “There is no such thing as society . . . people must look after themselves first” marked the high-water mark of market economics. In 2020, Amazon had a net income of \$21,300,000,000, the profit extracted from the process of servicing exchanges. Its founder, Jeff Bezos, was reckoned to be “worth” over eight times that. Amazon takes an average of \$2.75 a year from every man, woman and child on earth. We seem to regard that as not just acceptable, but the result of some inevitable law of nature. It is, in reality, a sign of very serious incoherence that threatens both social and environmental survival.

Bezos is the exemplar of *homo economicus*, and presents as one of the most successful competitors. But it is apparent from lived experience that most people are not engaged in the contest, and perhaps the only ones who fully commit to it are traders, merchants, and the middle-men who are daily concerned with profit and loss. It is difficult to understand the people one lives among if it is assumed that the majority make their most important choices on the perception of financial advantage. In Britain, Brexit showed the problem. The sight of poor communities sustained by EU funds voting for Brexit is hard to explain if one thinks that money is people’s main concern. Research shows that regions with the greatest economic dependence on the EU were most likely to vote Leave (Jones 2017).

Ebbw Vale in Wales was probably receiving more EU financial support than any other small town in Britain but voted 62% to leave the Union and forgo the income. The driving factor, from anecdotal evidence in mystified media, was the large number of voters who felt excluded from power over their lives. The town had been formed by giant steelworks, the largest in Europe, a founding cog in the machine of the industrial revolution. It collapsed at the end of the twentieth century and became home to many impoverished families who had lived for a century or more in a strongly unionized

community with a powerful sense of identity and pride (MacKenzie et al. 2006). Its people became some of the most deprived in Britain (Bloodworth 2017). The prospect that they might take back control from remote bureaucrats (and the English) mattered more than other arguments. Of interest here is that the Ebbw Vale communities remain close, despite any hardship. It was believed in 2020 that the reason they suffered one of the highest coronavirus rates in Britain was precisely because of the closeness of their communities, where sharing over-rode the protection of separation (Smith 2020).

Personal advantage did not much drive their calculation. They obviously did not share the modern attitudes of what Donatella Di Cesare (2021) describes as “immunitarian” democracies, in which social distancing fits into a polity where everybody is separated from everybody else, and the role of the state lies in keeping them safe and separated³. That leans towards the totalitarian framework described by Hanna Arendt (1975), in which the state replaces social relationships. It created the un-natural space of lock-down survivalism, where acts of mutual support become forbidden and criminalized and denial of our innately cooperative tendency magnifies mental disturbance and widespread misery. The American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2013, 18) coined the phrase “mutuality of being,” to illustrate how obligations typically only associated within families actually extend out from one’s kin to the wider group. Mutuality of being describes the feelings of affinity, protection, and cooperation that cohere communities together and, as Sahlins shows, construct social life. This helps to explain the point of accumulating wealth in an impoverished society—not to buy a ticket out but a place within. The Kogis’ neighbors have included large scale drug dealers, *narcotrafficientes*. The young men drawn into this business used their money to build reputations as generous donors to their families and communities; this seemed to be more important than flashing personal wealth and was an echo of the huge social investment made by great drug lords like Pablo Escobar. Escobar devised and funded a hugely expensive program of civic improvement in Medillin including reconstructing an entire slum. The point of wealth was to buy reputation. Anyone can see from the charity galas of great cities that this is not an understanding restricted to drug lords.

The Unrealistic Market Economy

The sense of mutuality underpinning *zhigoneshi* comes with a sense that one owes a debt to life—debt to the ancestors, to each other, to the land. A society based on competition is essentially unstable and unsustainable, which is why the history of market economies is one of boom and bust. They eat themselves and alienate their populations.

In 1944 Karl Polanyi published *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. The opening sentence, “Nineteenth century civilization has collapsed,” appeared when Europe was in ruins. His magnum opus is an impressive analysis of how the notion of a self-regulating market economy had come about and produced unstable and self-destructive societies that function poorly. With interesting prescience, Polanyi predicted that

[s]uch an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man [sic] and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness. (3)

By the spring of 1945 there were some 14 million refugees in Europe and cannibalism was reported in Berlin (*A Woman* 2005; personal account from author’s great-aunt). Politics was failing, and so was economics.

Politics and economics had been bound together with the invention of *homo economicus*. The seventeenth century science of “political economy” saw each nation as an isolated sovereign entity, which fueled discussions of its sustenance in terms of a market with no moral basis beyond supply, demand, and trust. Trade was seen as the transfer of wealth between competitors in a zero-sum game, which meant that it had less to do with reciprocity than with the masculine world of piracy, robbery, plunder, and gangsterism. Thus, the trading system as a self-regulating agent was established (Polanyi [1944] 2001). It involved the monetization of transactions; all trade had to be measured in currency and valued by profit (Gaido 2016). Everything was regulated hierarchically by price. Market economics supported a political philosophy that valued manufacturing over agriculture, forceful colonial exploitation over mutual exchange, and absolutist authority over local autonomy.

This is the system which became globally connected and in which tycoons and monopolists, Bezos and his few great competitors, now flourish.

Polanyi’s book (and the many more economic anthropology textbooks that have followed in a similar vein since) provide inspiration to think again about how the exchange of goods and services could happen without being driven by private profit. He drew examples from the ancient world, from mediaeval England, and from Malinowski’s seminal work on the *Kula* ritual enacted by the Trobriand islanders of Kiriwina, Papua New Guinea. His ideas are clearly visible in John Murra’s description of Inca and pre-Inca Andean society, which portrays a clear, if defunct, example of the non-market behavior of reciprocal exchange. Murra argued, in a series of works beginning in 1956,

that the pre-Columbian economy of the central highlands of South America was not organized on market principles but on principles of reciprocity in a “vertical archipelago,” which he showed meant that exchange was driven by the mores of relationships across different economic zones (1956; 1964; 1967; 1972; 1980; 1985; Wachtel 1981). The Inca organized labor and the movement of goods on the basis of reciprocity and obligation. For example, someone with food would share it in exchange for labor, and the state “paid” for labor with textiles, and greater service with land.

A detailed example of how a moral, cash-free economy worked can be seen among the Colombian Muisca in the sixteenth century (Langebaek 1987). There were markets in every town and travelers would make four days’ journey and more to exchange goods (Langebaek 1987, 131) without currency “in silence and without speaking” (Oviedo [1548] 1852, 407). These transfers were not called gifts or tribute. In many cases they were surplus production given as a duty to specialist storekeepers for eventual distribution when needed (Langebaek 1987, 45). The goods exchanged included salt, coca, cotton, blanket/shawls, gold, pottery and spondylus shells. There was apparently no negotiation for seasonal supply variation; agriculture moved between different temperature levels to adjust for that. Goods could be exchanged without debate as their relative values were understood in a moral and ecological framework, based on the material in an object, the distance it had travelled, and the work that had gone into it.

Exchange conducted in silence does not sit easily with the notion of negotiation and a variable “market price.” A system of dumb trade between communities, allowing them to exchange necessities on set days and in designated places, was described among a huge range of people who had no currency, and were not trading for profit. The U’wa in Colombia still exchanged goods this way well into the twentieth century. Products such as beeswax, woven bags, medicinal plants, dried fish, coca, cotton fabrics, and salt were (and perhaps are still) deposited on fixed dates at exchange sites marked with tall carved stones. When the sites were revisited by the depositors, other goods had appeared to be collected in their place (Falchetti 1997).

Exchange without negotiation, currency, or profit is ancient and was widespread. Around 200 AD Philostratus wrote that Appolonius found gold, flax, linen, and ivory deposited unguarded at a crossroad where Ethiopians left goods for Egyptians to exchange unseen for their own wares. The story may be apocryphal, but Philostratus says “the same custom still survives among ourselves” (Philostratus 1809 1:2). This also seems to have been a pattern right across the Arctic from the Pacific to Scandinavia (2:255).⁴ Around 1270, the Persian geographer Zakariya al-Qazwini ([1838] 202) described what appears to be silent trade between Arab sea traders and the people of Sri Lanka, in which

goods were left on the shore overnight and the bargain was completed when enough cloves appeared.

Silent exchanges were not conceived in terms of profit and loss but as social practice, performed according to obligations that were believed to maintain the health, prosperity, and fertility of the community, and that was the law that governed it. A description of silent exchange some 300 miles inland in Ghana (Brun 58), published in 1624 by a German who had spent three years on the Gold Coast (Jones 1982), says that by pre-arrangement trade goods are left in a hut to be invisibly replaced with gold, and the author finds it “a great wonder that one party does not betray the other” (Brun 58). The European approach of short-term plunder makes indigenous reciprocity and the need for a supportive relationship baffling. That seems to be the difference between thinking in terms of *zhigoneshi* and ruthless competition.

The switch in South America from the mutuality of *zhigoneshi* to the market economy was not driven by logic or any necessity except for colonial power. Once currency was introduced by Spanish conquerors, exchange became commerce, the relative values of goods became fluid instead of fixed, and the notion of a negotiable price appeared. Then a new type of transaction appeared, which was in effect speculation on future prices, of goods, services, and the currency itself. The market became vocal, dealing was energized.

The Ecological Principle of Reciprocity

Reciprocity has been an important “central trope” (Candea and da Col 2012), even preoccupation for anthropologists since Mauss outlined the *universal* social principles communities employ to create ties. Economics, seen through this lens, transforms from the exclusive domain of production and the consumption of commodities to an ecological force that creates and coheres life. Remarkably, Mauss ([1924] 2006) positioned reciprocity as a spiritual force called the “*Hau*” because it functioned almost psychically to ensure that “debts” were repaid. Following Sahlins ([1974] 2017), reciprocity can be conceived of as integral to “a wider circle of energies that must be rebalanced - to avoid causing the danger of [existential] disorder” (Attala 2018, 164) and therefore delivers as a broader message about what regulates being.

The idea that reciprocity is fundamental to survival is understood by indigenous people to go far beyond economics as it is currently understood. That is key to the Kogi message. The natural world in Kogi ontology is perceived as a conscious being, containing a multitude of other beings including themselves. They engage in a constant process of reciprocal exchange, *zubiield*, with these beings in an animated landscape. They translate this as making *pagamentos*, payments, and describe it to outsiders as the

reparation that must be made for what is taken in the processes of living, breathing, eating, drinking. But *z#biel* does not contain any idea of measurable value. It may be better translated as the ancient English common-law term “consideration.” “Consideration” describes something given in exchange for a benefit and has the effect of creating a contract. It does not need to have value related to the benefit, or even a defined value at all. It is an expression of commitment and reciprocity. The consideration for permission to build a house could be a peppercorn, a cotton thread, or a piece of leaf, and English law would recognize that as the “pagamento” that turns an action into a contract. *Consideration*, like *z#biel*, also carries the meaning of thoughtfulness, holding something in the mind as well as the hand. The exchange is not a mechanical transaction. It requires deliberation, again reflected in the old English legal precept that intention is at the heart of every contract and is required for the consideration to serve its purpose. One’s state of mind is important: the relative values of the exchange are not. *Z#biel* is not payment in the sense that others might use the word.

The fundamental concept here is the cosmic reciprocity that interrelates human institutions, earth, sky, living beings, weather, spiritual forces, different materials, and the creative entities in a great interdependent support network (Parra Witte 2020). If humans do not respect their obligations (and Younger Brother does not), the entire system breaks down chaotically.

The Anthropocene and the Conclusion

This journal is of course dedicated to exploring how existence at all levels is being disturbed as a result of unleashing the market and profit extraction in the so-called Anthropocene epoch. Younger Brother understands that his own reconfiguring of earth, sea, rivers, and the air produces life-threatening effects. The Holocene epoch of climate stability that followed the end of the last ice age is now overthrown.

This has been unintended collateral damage by industrialization. The rewards won in a market economy paradigm that monetizes obligations have benefited few. Half the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day and over 700 million people live in acute distress, precariously hoping to survive while enduring extreme, abject poverty. Those in “affluent” economies with apparently secure finances are not exempt from the vicissitudes of this market. Sudden downturns strike that can take away their homes, their incomes, and their families. The market has provided a type of growth based on greed at the expense of security and equity. This money and market focused approach, as we all know, led to increasingly damaging social breakdowns in the first half of the twentieth century, including the “Great Depression,” hyper-inflation, and the eruption of totalitarianism. An economic system that imagines wealth is conjoined with market

value rather than linked to one's ability to give distances people from their material cousins—the trees, rivers, and other animals.

Confidence has been replaced by deep anxiety. The perfect storm of climate change, the Anthropocene, unprecedented government borrowing, and job losses in association with the global pandemic are prompting discussions about the need for ideas of reciprocity and mutual support, debt cancellation and sharing, to enter global discourse. Questions reconsidering the value of care are also circulating. It required the virtual collapse of the financial system in 2008 and of the globalized trading system in 2020 to begin to crack the hard shell of certainty attributed to market economics and put social capital back into some economists' calculation of value.⁵ The use of currency and fiscal debt to lubricate exchange is not a smooth process. It has constantly run into critical problems, and now, when the global and domestic webs of trade have been torn apart and notional “money” has been issued on an unprecedented scale, it may be time to recognize that the foundations of this particular economic method are not only very fragile and cracking, but also do not support the sustainable, equitable future once imagined. Regardless of what one thinks about the validity of informing current methods with indigenous philosophies, one must accept that fiscal practice is a choice determined by those who create the orthodoxy in global narratives. And choices can change.

The Kogi view themselves as living within as part of a larger living being, the mountain, and the world. This perspective mirrors the symbiotic existence that originally produced life and continues to enable its healthy functioning. The Kogi consciously work to sustain the mountain's well-being, practicing a form of earth-acupuncture with their *pagamentos* at specific “hot-spots” of the organization of life (*ezuama*). An economy of life, as seen through the eyes of the Kogi, is biological/ecological. This practice is expressed through environmental care.

Biology reveals that life balances its equations homeostatically, accumulation in one area cannot be sustained indefinitely and must be recycled. Using the informal give and take of community sharing, economic thinking might support fiscal rebalancing and reduced inequality in the future. The expectation of the “free market” was that competition would induce mechanical self-regulation, but competition does not regulate for equality, it promotes winning, and sudden collapses.

Ignoring the give and take of *zhigoneshi*, taking resources without any balancing exchange, and failing to recognize what humans owe their environment, is seen by the Kogi as depriving the living world of sustenance. That creates “debt” (*shalá*) to the whole cosmic structure, which enforces repayment anyway. This can manifest as storms or drought, fewer animals, family misfortunes, agricultural problems, and even illness and death. Seeing the scale of *shala* Younger Brother creates, in 1990 the Kogi predicted

ecological harms and new kinds of sickness. They say they have not themselves suffered from Coronavirus.

Younger Brother now suggests technological solutions to curb the obvious environmental distress produced by current practices, but actions remain curbed by profit and interest. Kogi solutions are not technological; they are thoughtful, ecological, and environmental and, most importantly, they demand a substantial epistemological and ontological shift in how the world is understood. That begins with recognising the reality of universal symbiotic exchange, and that taking without reciprocity is a path to destruction.

Evidently sharing that understanding, Gregory Bateson, an influential epistemologist who worked on systems theory and cybernetics, saw the world as comprised of delicate interdependencies that were sadly invisible to most of us because we see it as comprised of separate and disconnected things. He said, “The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think” (Bateson 2010).

Placing value into things, calculating value using the desire-to-have as one’s metric, follows this perspective and is responsible for the way the markets function today. This perspective has been naturalized but is not natural. Following the Kogi, and aware of “the perfect storm” now in train, suggests it is time to shift focus as Bateson (1972; 1979) suggests: it is better to recognize (and value) the ways in which relationships bring things to life, for it is here that true wealth comes into being. *Zhigoneshi* works; we are learning that Darwinian self-interest may be suicidal.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Falk Parra Witte for assistance with this interpretation.

² Particularly chapter one, “Symbiosis Everywhere,” and chapter three, “Individuality by Incorporation” in Margulis 1998.

³ Thanks to Pravu Mazundar for pointing this out.

⁴ “. . . according to Paulus Jovius, the Lapps traded, " yet so that the flye the syght and ccompagnie of all merchantes. . . . They bargayne with simple fayth with absent and unknowen men” (Grierson 1903, 43).

⁵ E.g. Novy 2020.

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