

Andreas Weber

# SHARING LIFE

THE ECOPOLITICS OF RECIPROCITY

ALTERNATIVE  
WORLDVIEWS

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**Alternative Worldviews**

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This publication was commissioned by  
the India Office of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.  
*www.in.boell.org*

Published by  
Heinrich Böll Stiftung  
Delhi & Berlin, December 2020

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This publication is part of an assemblage  
curated on the topic of *Alternative Worldviews*  
on *www.in.boell.org*  
September 2020

ISBN 978-3-86928-221-3





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Andreas Weber

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# Introduction:

## Alternative Worldviews

A space for inquiry into an alternative ecology of knowledges and practices.

“We don’t need alternatives; we need rather an alternative thinking of alternatives” writes Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his corollaries towards the need for changing the world while constantly reinterpreting it through a collective endeavor and processes of struggle<sup>1</sup>.

When looking at the region of the Northeast of India, we find many existing narratives: Historically, the region is often analysed as a space locked in various lines and layers of conflict. More recent narratives follow the region’s importance for economic development agendas, highlighting its wealth of natural resources and its importance for connectivity due to its geographic location. Most of these narratives impose a look upon the region from afar. All of them address the Northeast as a space locked within rigid governance or development frameworks.

Such narratives often completely miss the importance of the region’s ecology and biodiversity in terms of rare species of flora and fauna and a wealth of several hundred languages and as many or more cultural traditions. If they do address these aspects, however, these narratives mostly qualify the region as an over-exotified tourist location. Such ‘extractivist’ perceptions do not recognise how the region’s biodiversity since centuries is produced and re-produced through a web of traditional knowledges and worldviews that often expand

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<sup>1</sup>Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2018.

far beyond the region into a larger eco-geographical space. Also the 'stewards' of this myriad of ecological wisdom remain mostly un-recognised: The people of the region themselves.

## **About this publication**

This assemblage of 12 stories, poetry, song, artwork and academic writings, published initially in electronic version at [in.boell.org](http://in.boell.org), speaks about alternative worldviews and traditional knowledge systems of the people of Northeast India and beyond. It is a space curated as an inquiry process into an alternative ecology of knowledges and ecological practices. Based on the recognition of co-existence of different ways of knowing, practicing or being, the assemblage highlights a felt need to inquire and experience the affinities, divergences, complementarities and contradictions between them.

Evolving around the main essay “Sharing life. The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity” and based on a common understanding of the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and practices, the contributors to this assemblage visualize a wealth of indigenous epistemologies and encourage us to un-learn, de-theorize and re-assemble ourselves and our present thinking and methodologies. They do so in various ways of (non)engagement with the suggestions of the main essay that brings together emerging and ancient thinking from diverse disciplines and suggests that the predominantly existing, western-centric idea of the world and of ecology misses the understanding of aliveness, our own and that of the world.

The contributions reflect on these suggestions, while providing us with a look into traditional, cultural and spiritual practices, mainly stemming from indigenous knowledge systems

of the Northeastern region of India and beyond. Highlighting an urgent need for a better understanding of local realities, and for experiencing a sense of place, the contributors draw upon an ecological and political landscape that expands far beyond a generalised understanding of actual or conceptual (governance-related) boundaries and hegemonic development paradigms. Most importantly, the contributors highlight the need for breaking through those often painfully felt boundaries that have for centuries divided nature, culture and people. These boundaries are not a given, but enacted through certain ways the world has been structured and categorized over centuries. All contributions reflect a common understanding that ecology and biodiversity needs to be reclaimed – and constantly generated – as a process of lived and living realities in a system of reciprocal relationships between human and other than human beings. The assemblage itself creates in its parts and as a whole an image of this interwoven system and linkages. It should be understood as a production in flux and as an invitation to a dialogue about an alternative thinking of alternatives.

### **About the background**

*What could be a new narrative for the Northeast of India, and, how could new methodologies of inquiry and of un-learning of existing perceptions contribute towards un-covering of such a narrative?*

Equipped with these questions, since early 2019, a group of practitioners, artists, journalists, writers, academicians and experts working in and on the Northeast from multiple disciplines have started a shared journey of discussions and explorations about and within the region. Based on a common love for the Northeast and a need to care for its wellbeing, the group has ventured out to investigate new narratives centering around conservation of nature and biodiversity while acknowledging the interconnectedness of relationships

of people and nature. An understanding of the need for new methodologies for learning and exchange created an exploratory space to resolve together and to learn from the uniqueness of cultures, geographies, ecologies of the Northeast. Until now this 'WorkSpace' has brought together many people from within their individual contexts and histories. All of them share the intent to nurture and document existing local traditional knowledges, worldviews and histories of the region. The assemblage presented in this publication is one step within this process and should not be mistaken for a finalized production.

Besides the urge to seek a new narrative for the region and a renewed ecopolitical understanding overall, it is the concept of the Social Plastic by German artist Joseph Beuys that has greatly influenced the creation of the 'WorkSpace'. For Beuys, interconnectedness evolves out of social interactions between people. He took inspiration for such processes from trees or rivers that, as elements or systems of constant regeneration, over time and in various locations become a form of living sculptures which continuously recreate themselves and hence manifest as symbols for the living planet earth. The idea of the WorkSpace expands this idea further in perceiving each living element as constantly evolving and affected by multiple influences.

Gratitude goes to all the contributors to this assemblage for sharing their thoughts and insights, experiences and most of all their creativity, which grew from one another like the twigs and leaves of a tree. Gratitude also goes towards the larger group of the 'WorkSpace' who have been ready to step into unstructured and open spaces of exchange and have met and engaged with each other beyond boundaries and in a space of mutual trust. It is their knowledge and their professional but often also very personal struggles, and their readiness to share these experiences with others that are building the the 'WorkSpace' group, again growing like the stem and

branches of a tree. Gratitude also goes to the co-initiators of the overall process for initiating the idea for the WorkSpace being planted and nurtured, through dialogue, connections and exchange.

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It is only through the whole groups' commitment and compassion for the ecology of the region and their readiness to investigate and engage with each other and with the wisdom of the Northeast and beyond, that this dialogue about an alternative ecology of knowledges and narrative for a common ecological future is evolving.

Marion Regina Mueller,  
Heinrich Böll Stiftung,  
New Delhi, December 2020







## Daniel Langthasa

# Ecopolis

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The chorus of this song sung in Dimasa language is a Dimasa murithai (folk song) which is sung in a teasing, sarcastic manner to younger generations to encourage them to learn the art of weaving and crafting. This is an age old folk song passed orally from generation to generation. There are no recorded versions of these folk songs and as a result, many of the songs are getting lost in time.



*For listening, point your Mobile Phone camera at the QR code with your Camera App*

## Lyrics of Ecopolis

Am I moving too fast?  
Am I making to last?  
Am I waiting in line?  
Am I wasting my time,  
making myself so busy?

Am I taking too much?  
Am I talking too much?  
Am I fighting to earn?  
Am I lighting to burn,  
relearn and decolonize me?

Buma bo daoringya?  
(Mother doesn't know how to  
weave)

Bupha bo horingya?  
(Father doesn't know the art  
of craft)

Nana gajao maikhala bara  
ning thuringang?  
(When the beautiful baby  
is born, what will the baby  
sleep on?)

Bari ni laisho daindada, uran-  
ing thuringang?  
(Will you cut the leaves of  
the banana plant around the  
fence of your house, and let  
the baby sleep on them?)

I am walking with earth.  
I am talking with birds.  
I am breathing and listening,  
sensing and feeling the  
changes of my metropolis.

I give you my love!  
I give you my word!  
I will give what I receive.  
I feel what you need.  
You're turning into Ecopolis!

Buma bo daoringya?  
(Mother doesn't know how to  
weave)

Bupha bo horingya?  
(Father doesn't know the art  
of craft)

Nana gajao maikhala bara  
ning thuringang?  
(When the beautiful baby  
is born, what will the baby  
sleep on?)

Bari ni laisho daindada, uran-  
ing thuringang?  
(Will you cut the leaves of  
the banana plant around the  
fence of your house,  
and let the baby sleep on  
them?)



Bhagat Oinam

## Revisiting animism: An insider's story of the western discourse

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Western rationalism and scientific reading of the self and the universe is based on a binary between culture and nature, a divide that paves way to heighten human supremacy over the non-human world. This modernist thinking tracing back to Rene Descartes, later taken up by scientific reading of social life, creates a table of hierarchy with man on the top and the rest of the nature as means for human fulfillment. Fiddling with nature heightened by this perceived supremacy has not only led to continuous destruction of nature, but also emergence of several anomalies. The present crisis created by novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a case in point.

The last few decades have seen emergence of intellectual discourses critiquing scientism and western logic. Philosophical and anthropological studies (including that of Andreas Weber) have been highlighting the significance of indigenous thought and beliefs, showing finer conceptions of humans, persons and the environment, and non-divisibility of culture from nature. There are, however, challenges about use of vocabulary and methods of engaging with the indigenous. Works of these western philosophers and cultural anthropologists still fall within the discourse advanced in/ by the West. So, understanding the indigenous worldviews still remains methodologically incomplete.

Of all the crises that humankind has faced in the last many decades, environmental catastrophe stands out with most alarming tone. Starting from ozone depletion and melting of glaciers, to the filth in rivers and oceans by industrial pollutants, smog in the cities, leakages of oil, poisonous gas and viruses from factories and laboratories – the list is long.

And one can keep on adding. Climate change and ecological imbalance are turning out to be most troublesome crises of our time. But the irony is: What the modern man has failed, a virus has checked the ecological imbalance by default! It shows that nothing is indispensable – even the neo-liberal mode of production and growth.

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Environmental crises owe their origin to the kind of scientific epistemology and development models originated in the West, shaped by what was earlier called the ‘Enlightenment rationality’. Today what the West does symbolise what is global; it has lured the entire global south to follow one master narrative – the vertical graph of growth, development and wellbeing. So, it is no more a crisis of the developed world alone, but of the developing world too. The development model of the West is informed by a worldview initially peculiar to the West. The absolute distinction between the human and the non-human world, human beings as ‘end/goal’ and the non-human world as the ‘instrument/means’ for the fulfillment of the end, come from a specific kind of epistemology (knowing) and ontology (being). This worldview requires serious scrutiny.

The essay under review entitled, ‘Sharing Life. The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity’ by Andreas Weber engages with western scientific worldview raising serious questions on their validity and legitimacy. Weber gives an alternate reading of ecological issues mentioned above. He raises some fundamental flaws in the theoretical presuppositions of man and the universe. He goes back to the ‘world of animism’, which the colonial discourses despise as tribal and primitive. This bold move is well supported by alternate theoretical perspective showing sign of paradigm shift.

The strength of the essay lies in showing close linkages between what we, as a people, do and think. Weber sees, and quite correctly, that much of the collective human actions,

which are environmentally hazardous comes out of our indifference towards the non-human and the inanimate. This is the result of an ontology built by the modernist outlook in the West.

## **Development discourse and crises of western ontology**

For more than a century now, development has remained the key word for human progress and well-being. With development and growth as uncompromisable dicta, the challenge for the western science and law makers has been to address to the world how to sustain this development without completely exhausting the (natural) resources. Enough information has already been shared in the public domain on how fast we are using the non-human means to satisfy human ends. The idea of renewable energy, for instance, is one part of our attempts not to exhaust the resources. But in spite of the political propaganda of sustainable development, climate change and ecological imbalance have not reduced. The renewable energy project is again being implemented only through the 'lenses of developmental analysis' often leading to destruction of the very nature it is aiming to protect, e.g. leading to water shortages due to cleaning needs of huge solar parks, de-settlement of indigenous communities or disbursement of nomadic grazing grounds.

Addressing this crisis, according to Andreas Weber, requires a relook at the philosophical ground upon which western science is built. Development perspective makes a clear-cut distinction between 'that which is to be sustained' and 'for whom sustenance is aimed'. Another distinction is between 'development that is uncompromisable' and 'devising methods with least side effect that sustains development'. (The latter can be understood better in the light of what is being presented in the previous paragraph). Both these parameters are shaped by a hierarchical worldview where man is

at the top, whose vertical growth and material wellbeing are facilitated by the non-human world. To put it simply, the non-human world is for the consumption of the humans. So, growth and well-being of humankind is to be achieved by acting upon the nature and the non-human, by transforming these for human benefit. So, the nature and other non-humans possess instrumental value, whereas humans are intrinsically valuable. This is an unfortunate theoretical premise. It is upon this binary that emergence and development of western science and technology are shaped. Weber sees that western science and epistemology is programmed on the basis of the above-mentioned binary, articulated further through the distinction between culture and nature. The theoretical position is that humans are value seeking beings; their life is marked by culture. On the other hand, nature is seen as brute and naked. It has no value or meaning.

Since this science has gained tremendous success in terms of description and measurement of the bodily existence of the universe (including the human), the West continues to remain at the centre of all the major popular discourses. And with it goes the philosophical worldviews that not only support, but also trigger the methods and practices of the western science. The Cartesian mind, on which the dictum 'I think, therefore, I am'<sup>1</sup> is set, becomes the ontological foundation. Man, as a thinking being, and the rest of the beings as incapable of thinking, is the point from where human arrogance starts. Man is seen as the epicentre of scientific revolution that is capable of not only mapping the universe, but also transforming the same. Western science lures the humans to think that they can become God!

In spite of man being shown his place time and again, the arrogance hardly dies. Since it is the scientific mind that 'maps' and 'transforms' the universe the arrogance is not going to go away. This struggle to rule the universe is still visible in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. While COVID-19



has contributed in balancing the ecology by default, human endeavor to produce vaccine is yet again an attempt to reverse the new trend and create a human norm. On a lighter note, perhaps human arrogance emerged from the day Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit!

### **Need for an alternative**

Andreas Weber takes a drastic approach as an alternative to the 'global' trend. Here is an approach that signifies the importance of indigenous values and ways of life as means for sustaining the value of nature and the Anthropocene. Weber takes up the indigenous philosophical thoughts from several continents of America, Africa and Australia though he also acknowledges that lived life of an indigenous community cannot be generalised. However, his dealing of the indigenous concepts is generic and carries universalising tendency, as are the works he refers to, whether it is Bruno Latour<sup>2</sup>, Nurit Bird-Davis<sup>3</sup> or others. This, of course, cannot be an issue of criticism as concepts when handled have to be dealt in abstraction and cannot be locked down by the particularity of practices. Thoughts always carry the tendency to generalise, and that is how humanity connects.

The highlight of the alternative is brought out through the concept of 'reciprocity'. Though reciprocity is also a popular idea in the West, particularly in the Continental philosophy (and also in Judaism), the author uses it as a unique way of life of the indigenous peoples. Unlike the western ontology where the issue of being is centred around human existence, for the indigenous it is continuous interaction among different constituents of nature (humans included). Humans do not have a privileged or superior position over the non-humans. For the indigenous segregation does not work upon the animate and the inanimate, human and the non-human. Rather there are spirits present in all things in nature – whether it is stone, tree, birds, animals, humans, and



the moon. One interacts with the other marked by reciprocity. Bird-Davis' comparison of modernist epistemology with animist epistemology in that former is 'cutting trees into parts' and latter is 'talking to trees' is a fascinating description rich in philosophical content.<sup>4</sup> Equilibrium defines the life of the indigenous.

These traditional beliefs of reciprocity and equilibrium are prevalent among the non-modern and non-western world. Let me add here one fascinating creation myth from Ao Naga community of Northeast India. The Ao community believes that they emerged out of 'lung terok' (six stones). The interesting part of the myth is the multiple readings of the same myth. A closer look will reveal where these readings are coming from in terms of methodological ground. The first narrative goes with an explanation informed by political and anthropological studies of space, origin, memory and identity. This narrative highlights a place called Chungliyimti in the present Tuensang district of Nagaland as the place of their origin. Beyond this place Aos do not carry any folk memory. These six stones are supposed to represent six clans of the Aos. It explains the community's effort to mark the symbols of origin, unity and identity.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, there are literary and cultural readings of worldviews emerging out of the traditional meanings and values. In this narrative these stones comprise three males and three females.<sup>6</sup> The second narrative is fascinating in the sense that this subject matter is not to be seen from the prism of truth and falsity. It is independent of scientific yardsticks unlike the first narrative. This narrative further breaks the realist reading of the inanimate. Gendering the stones should be seen as traditional way of reciprocity between the animate and the inanimate, and thus imagining and anticipating equilibrium in the universe. This narrative can be connected with Graham Harvey's<sup>7</sup> articulation that in animism the world is full of persons – stone person, human person, bird person, etc.

## Animism and the problem of discourse

26 Andreas Weber uses the term 'animism' to explain the philosophical (or cosmological) worldviews of the indigenous. While he has categorically explained that indigenous communities do not use the term 'animism' to represent their worldview, he uses it in continuation to what the colonial scholars have used. Perhaps he does it with a purpose. As far as I can see, Weber uses the term 'animism' to take it out of the valuational frame of colonial discourse where animism is seen derogatorily as primitive thought and practices of the 'tribes'.

Referring to Harvey that animism is a belief that world is full of persons (as mentioned in the previous section) and life is lived in interaction among persons, Weber further highlights the belief that there is spirit (as sign of life) in everything in the world. This thought breaks the realist bifurcation of the animate from the inanimate, and human from the non-human. Similar thought is being expressed by Sri Aurobindo<sup>8</sup> (the 20th century Indian saint and philosopher) that there is spirit/energy in every being including that we call 'inanimate'. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is deeply spiritual and built on the classical Indian philosophy, particularly Advaita Vedanta, where oneness of the spirit is conceived out of the multiplicity of spirits. Such a philosophical thought is not considered animist, but spiritual and metaphysical – a narrative of unqualified monism.<sup>9</sup> One can see parallel thought in Plato's 'world of forms' in classical Greek philosophy.

Weber's recourse to animism as a solution to better understanding and living is well taken. The idea of inner experience and further sharing of this experience are novel ideas. It is through reciprocity that persons share and benefit from one another. These traits of animism, as Weber sees, provoke one to compare and contrast between the indigenous and western scientific worldviews. This exercise has been attempted

by Weber, but looks less convincing.

Let me put two points for quick reflection. Firstly, western philosophy is not one but many. There have been debates and contestations among different schools. One such example is between analytic-continental divide until the emergence of philosophers like Dan Zahavi and several others. Similarly, indigenous communities engage different ways of articulating their philosophies. There could also be meeting points between indigenous philosophy and continental philosophy. For instance, Heidegger's critique of technology<sup>10</sup> and reference to 'enowning'<sup>11</sup> may find similar resonances in the indigenous philosophy. So, the tables of differentiation provided by Weber foreclose the possibility of exploring the grey areas.

27

Secondly, animism as an alternate philosophy to western epistemology is not a complete bifurcation. Animism is a western concept addressed to the non-western world by the western scholars. So, this debate is a family debate within the western philosophical discourse. It is not meeting of two distinct traditions. At least the writings of Andreas Weber seem to give this impression.

### **Is there an alternative to the 'alternative'?**

I think this is an important question. How do we read a non-western world in order to address to a global problem? I have stated in the introduction that problems of the global south are largely backwater problems of what the global north has been facing. As much as technological, economic and political practices have been appropriated by the non-western world, the remedy even in the form of indigenous comes through western lenses. This looks quite obvious. I am not suggesting that non-western world give up the western paradigm. Ideas have no boundary, and we are moving towards a free world. Yet, there could be a way out!

When Heidegger coined the term 'Dasein'<sup>12</sup> ('there-being' or 'being-there'), he could have simply stated 'authentic human'. Language is not merely a symbol of communication; it is much more than that. It is a world in itself. The terms like 'self', 'man', 'being', etc. have a long history of journey carrying the baggage of meaning and values. Dasein got rid of all the baggage – foremost, it got rid of traditional western discourse of explaining human existence through rationality, mind and consciousness. Dasein highlights human existence (ontology) with embodiment, yet inseparably linked with doing/acting/engaging in one's mundane mode of living. I think Heidegger was undoubtedly smart.

Is not 'animism' too heavy a word? Philosophy of animism will fail to bring out the rich and diverse senses derived out of deeper experiences of collective lives, and the rich metaphysical articulation of the oneness of the spirit. Animism, as already defined through certain perspective, cannot come out of its original habitation. And this habitation lies in the colonial 'life-world'. I do not know how Weber and others can refine and bring out the 'pristine nature' of animism. My fear is simply that. Rest, the intention and commitment, and boldness with which the author ventures out for an alternative worldview to western ontology, is commendable. I believe a dialogue has started!

1

I am referring to Descartes' famous dictum 'Cogito ergo sum' (I think therefore I am) whereby one's existence is defined by the capacity to think or reason. See Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditation on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, Heckett, 1998.

2

*Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Polity Press, 2018), and *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

3

"'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology*. 40 (S1), pp. S67–S91.

4

This is being described by Weber in his essay.

5

This narrative is gathered through the interviews conducted on several Ao respondents (as many as six) from various parts of Mokokchung district and Dimapur in Nagaland as part of an IGNSA sponsored field research during 2013. (Interview was conducted by Asangba Tzudir, and the author was the principal investigator).

6

See the work of Temsula Ao, *The Ao - Naga Oral Tradition*. Heritage Books, Dimapur, 2012.

7

See, Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, Columbia University Press, 2005.

8

See, Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*. Lotus Press, Pondicherry, 2005.

9

The idea of 'unqualified monism' expresses that reality is inalienable one (singular) in spite of being perceived sensorially as multiple. This idea initially found in the Upanishads and Brahma Sutra is being popularised through his commentary by Adi Sankaracharya in the philosophical thought known as Advaita Vedanta. For details, see S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vols. 1 & 2, Oxford India Paperbacks, 2008.

10

Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', trans. W. Lovitt, in D.F. Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, Routledge, 1993.

11

See, Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. P. Emad and K. Maly, Indiana University Press, 1999.

12

See, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, 2010.



Linda Chhakchhuak

## Saving jhum, the crucible of life in Northeast mountains

31

Nature is the only refuge for humans and only in nature can one find the solutions to the problems in the post coronavirus pandemic and in the age of climate emergency. No matter how advanced a society has become, it cannot claim to be free and independent from nature. The interaction between the people of the wealthy and advanced societies and the ones who are still living close to nature is not on equal footing. The Northeastern region of India has a unique system of growing food called 'jhum', around which evolved the upland communities. This was evolved over thousands of years of living in the mountains, where making a living is tough work. The practice itself is the embodiment of a people living in close harmony with nature and has produced a body of knowledge about life and nature that is irreproachable. Increased populations, privatisation of tribal lands and development projects have, however, squeezed the lands available for jhum cultivation reducing the jhum cycle and degradation of the jhum lands, and endangering the survival of both the practitioners of jhum and their way of life. In the final analysis, the survival of the jhum fields is linked to the survival of not only the indigenous way of life but also the advanced societies as they are interdependent.

The land, the forests, the plants and animals, the rivers and springs, the atmosphere and all the natural cycles are the cradle of life. This is no longer a hypothesis or a belief in the divineness of Mother Nature, but a scientific fact and a fact of experience. It is the only source of sustenance and the only harbour for the survival of the humans and other life on Earth. Everything that the body needs comes from nature. Oxygen, the most urgent requirement is still free, though in

the top cities of the world where industrial and fossil fuel pollution has turned air into slow poison, the rich can afford to buy technology that purifies air for their own consumption. But no matter how rich or affluent or how technologically advanced one has become, the dependency on nature or the umbilical cord tying one to nature and its cycles can never be cut off though the affluent tend to believe that they no longer need nature and live away from it. And this is where all the problems of today begin.

With the context above as the background, in the 21st century, the human population can be divided into four main categories: 1) those who live in nature 2) those who live with nature 3) those who live on nature's periphery to mean the ones who live in urbanised spaces, and 4) those who live on nature's tertiary meaning the rich and wealthy.

In the post- novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the post-industrial climate emergency world, the global search for visions, dreams, myths, theories and models has begun as they look to replenish the saturated theories, philosophies and economies of the Western world to enable it to continue to live as the category Four kind of people. They could be described as the ones who sucked the Earth dry and lived off the fat and the lean of the Earth. They have systems in place that have removed them from directly engaging with the natural cycles of feeding and sustaining the body. They are engaged with other levels pandering to what can be called conspicuous consumption and in keeping their system for manufacturing and distributing these functional. To keep this category of people in place has led to nothing but destruction of the very planet that we live on even as those occupied in it feel that they are removed from nature and do not need it anymore. Depending on the level of their social consciousness or 'awokeness', the wish of the people in category Four is to either 'help' the other categories of the people to reach their level, required to expand their influence for their own



survival; or to 'learn' the secrets and philosophies of the people in the other two categories for their own reasons. Within a given place category Three population, are always kith and kin of the category One and Two people, but they have become clones of category Four. The category Four people are in control of the new modern systems such as the state, markets, industries and so on, and, as such, are the conduits through which the base of the system for the continued exploitation of nature is maintained. There is no space for Gaia in this connection. It is all about business as usual.

The Northeastern region of India has always been a cynosure of curiosity. It is strategically located and also known as the Eastern Himalayan region. To quote a report, "it represents a distinct bio-geographic zone, rich in bio-resources, ethnic cultures and folklore traditions". The diverse population of numerous tribes and ethnic groups populating the plains and mountains makes it one of the most important places on Earth where hundreds of different cultures, traditions and languages flourish so close to each other and are intertwined in every social or political process.

The land mass labelled and passed off as the Northeast region of India houses eight states – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Wedged between five foreign countries – Tibetan-China in the north sharing borders with Arunachal Pradesh; Myanmar with Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Mizoram; Bhutan with Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim; and Bangladesh with Mizoram, Meghalaya Tripura and Assam – the region, with its mountainous periphery states bounding the Assam-Barak plains, has virtually been a highway of kingdoms, populations, cultures and languages over the ancient past. Each state is peopled by dozens of tribes and ethnic communities, which claim the status of indigenous people amidst the presence of a large population of the general majority communities of the country and

the neighbouring nations. These 200 odd tribes and ethnic communities, with their unique histories, traditions, culture and languages and dialects call this region their home, which they have nurtured, defended, conquered or lost to others over the past centuries. Today, these defence mechanisms have kicked in in the form of demands for homelands ranging from movements for independence from India, as seen in the many armed movements and armed campaigns for exclusive tribal domains to political campaigns for states, union territories and district councils within the constitutional provisions of the Indian state, as in the case of the struggles of dozens of others.

The region has unique qualities on every front, whether it is social, political, historical or geographical; it offers a location where undiscovered facts of the evolution of human culture and history, geography and biodiversity are still waiting to be found, documented and used for further understanding the people and the place. Every tribe and ethnic community has its own collection of traditional knowledge of life in the form of its religious beliefs, communication with the gods and spirits, origin myths, migration histories, folklores, knowledge of plants, animals and natural cycles, agriculture, food systems, art and designs, clothing and the perception of the universe in general. This makes this region like a living library of many facets of human knowledge. An added curiosity is that almost all of them are oral societies with no written script. Every few kilometres, one finds a different dialect or language and a different tribe, communicating with each other through a link language that emerged out of the seething need to make each other understood over the barriers of tongues.

Geographically, the Northeast is one of the 34 biodiversity hotspots of the world. It is also a region under extreme stress, this raising the stakes because of the presence of endemic plants and lichens families, which are still hardly

explored. Every kind of climatic condition is found here and the forests are tropical, temperate and alpine. India is one of the 12 mega biodiversity centres of the world and within India, the Northeast region boasts of having 80 percent of the flowering plants species, many of them endemic to the region. The Northeast has been termed a cradle of flowering plants and mother species and plant genetic material, which have a direct bearing on the survival of many important plants and crops that have a bearing on the food security of the world. These are likely to become extinct in the next few generations due to extreme human activity for so-called development projects and expansion of human habitats under the relentless policies of a nation state that is still aggressively seeking to expand its economic horizons into the fragile mountains ecosystems of the region.

It is the category Two people who live here with a few inhabitants of the category One, and this is what makes the region even more special.

### **Jhum, the crucible of traditional knowledge on food production**

The tribes and communities of the region have survived in these high ranges over generations only because they have learnt to eke out a living from the fragile hills while protecting the priceless mountain ecosystems even as their activity adding value and enhancing biodiversity. The mutual nurturing that evolved over the ancient times is called by different names in the different languages of the hills but today, this method has been universally called as the 'jhum' system of agriculture in the hills.

These regions were pristine and the tribes lived in close harmony with nature with their daily sustenance supplied through this system of mountain agriculture. In the jhum system the lands/ forests are distributed by the village

authorities among its citizens. The vegetation in these plots is felled, cleared and left to dry. Just before the rains, it is fired and left to cool. Rice and other crops are planted on the ashes. There is not much digging of the soil except with a stick to deposit the seeds under the soil. Rice of different varieties, all manner of vegetables and even cotton are grown on these plots. The next year the plot is left fallow to allow it to revert to its natural vegetation and another plot is cleared of trees to make it cultivable. The process goes on every year in a cycle till the farmers come back to their original plots that have regenerated forests in the meantime. In the old days, this jhum cycle lasted three or more decades. Now, the cycle has been drastically reduced to between three to five years in many places because of several factors such as the population growth, privatisation of common lands and forests, urbanisation expanding into the domain of the jhum fallow lands. Rapid degeneration of the forests with the original jhum lands having been privatised and given over to timber logging industries, and plantations over the decades have crunched into the spaces of the uplanders forcing the people practising jhum to go deeper and deeper into the mountains. Due to the intrusion of the outside world into their domain, the age-old method that stood the test of time has become unproductive and has left a destructive trail on the mountains.

The 'jhumias' (jhum cultivators) are blamed by the government and the urbanised people for destroying the forests and stigmatised. For the past few decades, the system was called destructive and efforts were made to 'wean' away the people from jhumming by offering them money to stop or giving them settled plots and market oriented crops to grow. But there being no infrastructure of link roads to the marketing centres most of the crops are left to rot in the fields. Infrastructure building in the mountains is anyway too costly to be economical. Besides, it is not entirely desirable in the soft and landslide prone hills. The alternative solution based on

market-oriented farming to the jhum method has not worked so far as time and again people go back to the traditional practice. It is high time it is understood that the mountains and mountain ecosystems are not meant for mass industrialisation, exploitation or market oriented activities. A way has to be found here to accommodate the needs of the jhum families without interfering with the fragile ecosystem, which makes life itself possible in the slopes.

Though majority of the people in the rural areas, particularly in the states of Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland survive on jhumming, the governments have made no effort to take policy decisions to enable the system and give it the support it needs. Jhumming and living on it is one of the toughest jobs now. People continue to do it because there is no other way to live in the uplands. It is a tribute to the practice and the mountain ecosystem that it still has the resilience to be the safety net for the thousands of people who would otherwise be paupers and beggars on the streets of the modern towns and cities. Whenever people fall off the rungs of the modern system they fall back on the jhum fields, which are free so far. As jhumias, they have little cash money, but they are proud to be people who are dependent on none and stand on their own feet, thanks to the common lands and the common creed of sharing of the jhum societies. The official powers failed to understand that the age-old practice for what it is. It is an ancient method, which is a holistic solution to living in the mountains. It is entirely the opposite of the modern system, which is based on private property, individual profit and the market. On the other hand, jhumming can only be done on common lands. It is based on a common property resources regime. Land is shared along with the labour and the harvest if there are members who cannot jhum their plots. The aim of growing the rice or the crops is not the market but for feeding oneself, family and neighbours. If there is surplus, it is sold off in the local hat or weekly markets, which are usually away from the jhum fields. It is the last left spaces

where the true indigenous way of life still remains. Just one plot in most places has a plant diversity of more than 42 making the system one of the richest. The jhum field is the 'University of the Tribe' where they learn the secrets of the Earth. The plants, the seasons, the insects and weeds, the surrounding forests, the nature's cycles are their teachers. This is where the ancient stories are told and retold, and new ones are created. This is the place where the seeds are saved and guarded. The entire body of the traditional knowledge of the tribes originated in life in the jhum fields. The doctrine of sharing, the values of thrift and the arts and crafts is passed on here. The history, beliefs, myths, folklore, poetry or songs, festivals and migration stories revolve around life in the jhum cycle. If the practice becomes extinct, the university would come to an end, heralding the extinction of the tribe's identity and culture. This would be disastrous for the future as this is the group of people who are safeguarding and protecting the ecosystems. Survival for the rest of the human race and living beings would be difficult if the guardians of the ecosystems and the intellectual knowledge of ages were to be wiped out.

In the earlier paragraphs, reference has been made to four categories of populations living in the world today. The modern system represented by people in the third and fourth categories are those who are government servants, bankers, company workers and others with salaried incomes or business people or contractors and traders. They are powerful as they represent the state, corporate, banks and have money. Money, particularly fiat money, is the instrument of the capitalist world, which has magical powers to make people into their slaves and change systems. The people in the first and second categories live in the jhum systems and have nothing left except their link to nature, dwindling common lands and their traditional knowledge to sustain them. Their lives are tenuous and as fragile as the irreplaceable mountain ecosystems faced with the challenge of survival in these most

challenging times. The base of their life, which also happens to be the foundation of nature to thrive and continue to nurture are the common lands. These are being swallowed up by the other categories of people buying up these lands and privatising the commons is a fearful trend even in these remote mountain states. How to preserve the commons is the biggest quest and this is where undivided focus and concrete action is needed from the thinkers and well-wishers from outside of these spaces, as they are rapidly disappearing into the mist of time.





Sonal Jain

## The entropic forest-2020

Located in the frontier state of Meghalaya, in the Northeast of India, I have a unique position, a liminal one – of being between multiple worlds and therefore worldviews. On the one hand, it is the era of surveillance capitalism still taking shape from a techno-military-corporate complex. On the other hand is an indigenous world of the Khasi-Jaintia people steeped deep in myths, stories with no separation between human and non-human realms. This makes for a diverse yet seamless weave with an effortless disappearance of consciousness as the direct perception of phenomena that inform us of our own existence. Multiple, shape-shifting worlds open up.

Ansell Pearson argues that “in constructing a posthuman paradigm that makes the logic of capitalist biotechnology integral to the plan of human history”, there is a “disabling (of) alternate stories of human pasts and human futures” and therefore the urgency for telling of and re-telling of our stories. Through stories that are deeply embedded in a landscape and location I explore a sense of place, which connects us to and restores one of our deepest needs, a sense of identity and belonging. And in turn this becomes a “psychologically healing journey” in the way Andreas Weber talks about it in his paper, “Sharing Life. Animism as Ecopolitical Practice”.

### The virtual lights, part I

#### **Interior of Aiban’s house. His bedroom at night.**

Aiban, sits on a mattress placed on the ground. He is twenty-one, with an unkempt look and short stubble. He is

wearing track pants and a loose T-shirt. He rests his back against the side of the bed. The mattress rolls from the bed onto the floor. The bed sheet has been pulled onto one side. The light from the TV screen illuminates his face. He is deeply engrossed in playing FIFA on the PlayStation. He has a cigarette in his mouth, with a long trail of ash built up on it. The ash then falls on him and he stubs off the cigarette in an ashtray close by.

As the round of the game ends he puts the joystick down and stares listlessly at the screen for a few moments. He then picks up a box and puts his hand into it. He takes his hand out; it has play slime on it. He plays with the slime for a brief minute and then puts it back into the box.

He gets up slowly shakes his legs out, drinks some water from a brass bottle and lights up another cigarette. He moves towards the window, draws the curtains aside and looks out. He hears his mother call his name and replies, “Yes ma, I’m coming.”

The dining room is dimly lit. It is stuffed with things, though neatly – decorations, diaries and electrical devices. There is a TV next to the dining table. On it a paranoid news anchor blares on about the very rapid spread of COVID-19 in India. Aiban helps his mother, Banri lay the table and then sits down and watches the news. He plays with the switch of the table lamp, turning it on and off as he waits for his mother to come.

Banri comes back into the room and joins him at the dining table. They begin to eat and watch the news in silence. The news is on the new effects of the coronavirus and how a new finding is that it causes blood clots in all the major organs. Banri switches the channel to one of local news. A woman news anchor says, “Early this morning on the Shillong-Sohra road a deer was spotted. In another bizarre event hundreds of fish were found swimming in the compound of a man who

had just died. The compound was flooded due to the three days of continuous rains and the fish were seen making circumambulations around the house before disappearing just as mysteriously as they had appeared. The number of COVID-19 cases in the state has gone up to 305.”

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They finish dinner and Aiban goes back to his room, goes to the bathroom, lights another cigarette and begins playing the game again. He falls asleep with the joystick in his hand.

He wakes up and begins playing again. He suddenly looks down at his feet and there is slime on his feet. His feet appear webbed. In panic, he removes the slime and throws it away. He still has some stuck on his hands, so he takes a newspaper lying close by and wipes it clean. Aiban wiggles his toes a bit, regains his composure and continues to play the game. Slowly he dozes off again.

He wakes up with a start and immediately looks at his feet. Both his feet are webbed with the slime.

### **Exterior in a gently undulating field. Daytime.**

The sun is up high in the bright blue clear sky. Aiban is walking towards us with some difficulty. His feet are webbed and he is dragging them forward. In the background boys are playing football. We hear their animated shouting – asking for a pass and to score a goal. The scene has a dreamlike quality to it.

Aiban falls to the ground, gets up and continues. He is in a daze but also focused on his destination. A few white clouds appear on the horizon.

In the background is a small children’s park and in it is a statue of a giraffe made out of concrete.

There is a herd of cows in the field. Aiban walks in between them pushing two or three out of his way.

Aiban's point of view as he heads towards the thick sub-tropical, broad-leafed sacred forest. He crosses a group of megaliths as he enters the forest.

Inside the forest, it is dark and sounds of birds and insects overtake the senses, it is unreal and dreamlike. Aiban looks around. He is animated and alive; as if getting closer to something he is in search of. He walks along a path covered completely with moist leaves. He is now walking more easily with his webbed feet.

As he ascends a small hillock, he comes across a thick fallen tree and struggles to cross over it. Here the forest is a little more open. He then goes downward and comes to a stream and walks alongside it. The light in the forest changes rapidly, short spells of darkness are followed by beams of sunlight.

Aiban has walked some distance and is now tired and uncomfortable. He sits on a rock and takes his shirt off. We secretly look at Aiban from behind leaves, foliage and a tree trunk. Our angle of view is very wide and distorted on the edges. He looks towards his armpits and sees that there is golden coloured slime coming out them. He extends his arms sideways and the slime stretches and pans out like wings. He leaves his shirt on the rock and continues onwards. We hear the rustling of the leaves.

We hear a thunder storm brew in the distance. Aiban's point of view as he walks ahead and reaches a hillock in the forest. It overlooks a small valley with a stream flowing through it. All of a sudden, the sky darkens as storm clouds gather and it begins to rain very heavily. The winds lash out loudly. He seems to notice something down below and dashes towards the stream. There is a loud flash of thunder and a bright

stroke of lightening. And then there is darkness. We hear splashing in the water.

## **The dreaming waters, part II**

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### **Exterior by a stream. Evening, as the sun is about to set.**

Basil, an old man of sixty-six, wearing worn out torn clothes is sitting by a small stream below a bridge. He seems engrossed and oblivious to the world. He appears to be talking to himself as he looks towards the stream.

### **Interior. Basil's House. Day.**

In an empty, desolate, lonely house, Wanda a woman of aged fifty-three sits by the window peeling areca nuts. Carl, her son, is twenty-six. He is sitting on the stairs leading to the backyard labouring over and trying to repair a water pump. The emptiness and melancholia of the house screams out loud. It is a large house and is full of quirky, strange and old objects, antiquated furniture, a tiger skin, a big armchair, a gramophone. An ornately framed picture of a young Gaddafi occupies a central place on the grand sitting room wall. It is an eclectic mix of objects and has an absurdist air to it. There are three cats that lounge in different places around the sitting room that has a musty worn out feel to it. We move in a slow tracking motion through the room and into the long hallway.

Iba, the daughter, is wearing a white flowing dress. She is nineteen and has dark, intense eyes. She is standing looking out from topmost floor of a tall white tower. It is a mausoleum, which, with many floors, holds the cromlechs for the entire family. We fly in a circular pan around the mausoleum looking down at Iba as she sings a sad requiem in Khasi. Very large trees surround the tower. The whistling of the wind in

the trees accompany Iba's singing. The three cats prance around Iba.

46 Wanda looks out from the sitting room window as the trees outside sway from side to side in the wind. In the sky white clouds, like cotton candy float by rapidly. Wanda with a resigned look on her face says to no one in particular, "It's going to rain."

We hear a strange gushing sound coming from the underground rainwater harvesting tank outside. As Carl hears this he gets up to check what it might be. He opens a heavy metal trap door of an underground water tank. He lies down on his belly and looks inside. The gushing sound becomes louder; it has an echo but he is unable to stop anything. It is dark inside.

Iba is on the terrace, the sky is overcast and dark rain clouds gather. She picks up the clothes from the clothesline struggling against the gushing winds.

### **Exterior. In Basil's compound. Morning.**

The sun is out and it is a clear bright day.

Basil, Wanda's husband, walks in through high gates and heads towards the front door. His back is bent, shoulders stooped. He walks with his weight on his left leg, slightly dragging his right foot. He is wearing worn out torn clothes. He is exhausted, drenched with water dripping down his body.

He walks into the sitting room. Wanda is sitting by the window looking outside. As she hears him enter, she turns around to look at him. He goes straight towards large worn out armchair and lets his body fall slump into it. The water from his wet clothes seeps into the armchair and drips down

onto the ground, making a small puddle.

Wanda just stares impassively at him as he shuts his eyes, completely disengaged from his surroundings. She turns around and looks out again. Her face hardens slightly. She looks up at the sky and the storm clouds gather again very swiftly. We hear the rain come down heavily as we move out in a tracking motion of the sitting room into darkness.

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### **Interior. Sitting room. Morning.**

We hear the rain crashing down on the tin roof – it is deafening. The room is dark and gloomy. Iba is sitting on a rocking chair holding one of the cats a bit too tightly; she is nervous and out of sorts. The other two cats prance around her chair. Carl sits repairing an old radio and we hear the sound of different frequencies come and go. Wanda sits by the window, which is now closed, looking out.

Basil sits on the chair in the same position; his body has sunken a bit further into the chair. His eyes are closed and he seems unconscious or dead.

We track out of the room into darkness.

### **Interior. Sitting room. Next morning.**

The room is even darker than the previous day. We still hear the heavy rains accompanied by gushing wind and storm. Carl sits by an antique desk leaning on it. He is playing with the switch of an old table lamp turning it on and off. The light from the lamp illuminates his face as it comes on again and again. He is in a brooding mood. Wanda is staring blankly outside. Basil sits on the chair in the same position with his eyes shut and arms sprawled out. Iba lies sleeping on the sofa with her legs up on the armrest. The cats lie around Iba.

### **Exterior. Inside the forest. Daytime.**

Iba, in a white flowing gown, is in a sub-tropical, broad-leaved forest. She moves deftly hiding behind the trees looking at someone she is chasing. Her movements are blurred and hazy at times. The scene is dreamlike.

### **Interior. Sitting room. Day.**

Iba is lying on the sofa fast asleep. We move in a slow tracking movement out of the room into the darkness.

### **Interior. Sitting room. Next morning.**

We can hear the rain outside. It is now a gentle drizzle. Basil's face and hands are now visibly grey. His body is bloated like it's been underwater for a long time. Carl sits on the carpet leaning on a wooden sofa staring blanking into space. Wanda is staring at Carl. Iba sits on the arm of a sofa playing nervously with her hair. Slowly it stops raining and as the sun comes out, the room is flooded with light.

All the four members of the family look decomposed with time. Basil's body is very grey. The cats tensely move around Basil's body. It becomes very quiet. Slowly we hear the chirping of birds and then a faint gurgling from outside. The gurgling grows louder and louder. Iba looks up at Carl. He looks back at her and gets up. She follows him as he rushes out of the sitting room. Wanda follows behind. The gurgling is getting even louder.

They then rush up the stairs towards the terrace. The cats too follow. From the terrace, they look down to where the sound is coming from and see that the trap door of the underground water tank is open and water is gushing of the tank with great force. The entire compound is flooded.

As they look on in shock, from the water tank swim out



hundreds of fish. They swim in disciplined formations around the house circling it several times. We hear the loud frantic meowing of the cats who seem it be going crazy prancing on the wall of the terrace.

From under the water, we look at Wanda, Iba, Carl and the three cats up on the terrace looking incredulously down at us as we move deeper and deeper into the water and into darkness.

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### **The entropic forest, part III**

#### **Exterior. Inside the forest. Before sunrise.**

It is still dark; the moon is in the far distance. Clouds float by at a fast pace. The sky and moon are reflected in the pools of water in the stream. It is placid and calm. We move closer to the stream and see a reflection of the Puri (river nymph) reclining on her elbows on the edge of a stream. As we move closer we see that it is Iba. She is wearing a white flowing dress and a black jacket over it. Her movements are awkward and strange. Although she is human, yet she does not have any of the behaviour of a conditioned human. She is a creature moving about, wiggling and trying to stand as if she is not so adept at being on land. She struggles to stand but then gives up. She looks around with eyes wide open around her at the trees, rocks, the stream and bushes. The angle of view is very wide and blurred at the edges. She looks further up at the sky. It is blue with a few clouds floating past.

She lays on the ground looking up from her point of view. The world appears upside down. She makes a round shape with her fingers and looks through them. She is lost and softly humming a song to herself – a sad requiem in Khasi. She is sombre but not sad. She wiggles towards the water and puts her legs hidden under the white flowing dress into the water

and splashes around for sometime. She is just there. Just being.

She hears a sound in the water and turns around and looks at it. There are tadpoles in the water. She looks at them through the circle she has made with her fingers playfully.

### **Exterior. Inside the forest. Daytime.**

We look at Aiban in secret from behind leaves, foliage and trees trunks as he walks through the thick broad-leafed forest. Our angle of view is very wide and distorted on the edges. We hear heavy laboured breathing up close. Aiban looks tired and uncomfortable. He sits on a rock and takes his shirt off. Under his armpits there is golden coloured slime. He extends his arms outwards and the slime stretches and pans out like wings. He rests for a while then continues forward. We hear the rustling of the leaves.

We follow Aiban from behind trees and bushes observing him secretly. The stream is in our foreground. He reaches the top of hillock in the forest overlooking a small valley with a stream flowing through it. In the distance we hear a thunderstorm brewing. The winds lash out loudly and very suddenly the skies darken, storm clouds gather and it begins to rain very heavily. We look through the leaves and trees, which too are dripping with the rainwater.

Slowly we glide towards the stream. We hear sound of water splashing and entering the stream. We glide gracefully into the water looking upwards. We see against a background of heavy rain, thunder and storm Aiban running frantically towards us. As he reaches the steam he looks down at us. As we sink deeper and deeper into the water, the image of Aiban blurs further and fades away. Darkness.

*Based on the Khasi myth of Puri (water nymphs/ creatures)- heard in oral stories, narration of personal experiences, the poem IohPuri by Jobeth Ann Warjri, (25/09/2018) and readings from Desmond L. Khar-mawphlang's, The U NgatPuri Legends – The Crafting of Ecocritical Discourse in Folklore Imprints in North East India.*

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## Intrinsic wisdom for enduring nature

Traditional knowledge systems are local knowledge systems specific to a particular geographical context, explicit to a particular society and culture. They can be seen as a framework for local decision making for natural resource management, agriculture, settlement, housing, healthcare, handloom and handicraft. Traditional knowledge systems provide a source of ecological, economical, social, technological and philosophical learning for practitioners and act as signifier and metaphors. In the contemporary context, with the challenges of changing perspectives of geo-environmental conditions, they often could be considered as one of the sources for alternative ways to face such challenges. There is scope to learn collectivism, mutualism and minimalism, apart from acquiring ideas for adaptations and resilient development. Accordingly, traditional knowledge gets a distinct focus in contemporary discussions and it is approached through steps of de-learning, relearning and new learning. However, the state of wellbeing, identity, right and autonomy of holders and practitioners of traditional knowledge is in doldrums with challenges cropping up with fear of exploitation of their knowledge by others. This situation also prevails for the indigenous peoples of Northeast India.

### Outlooks

'Traditional knowledge systems' developed through people's interface with nature and the environment. The process started when groups of ancestors undertook the initiatives to develop a cultural landscape over a natural landscape. It was then transferred to different generations by oral and visual transformation processes. In course of time, traditional knowledge system has developed knowledge around ecosystem and ecology, which can be looked at as

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‘traditional ecological knowledge’. It is also evolved with technological solutions for ‘natural resource management’, through different production and construction processes, which can be looked as ‘traditional technological knowledge’ and above all it is always framed with certain values and ethical frameworks, which are called ‘traditional value and ethics’.<sup>1</sup> These three domains together create the path for a ‘way of life’, which can be viewed as: “Way of life = sum (traditional ecological knowledge+ traditional technological knowledge+ traditional value and ethics)”. It has been designed over space and time in a natural resource management system, agricultural system, settlement, food system, health system, artifacts and dress, communication system, governance system, and many more to form the foundation of culture and belief systems. Each of such practices is coded and framed through its own language or dialect. So, every native language and dialect of traditional knowledge system practitioners is a repository of such knowledge systems, which creates a continuum and endurance among the generations. Furthermore, the diversity of languages and dialect has an existential correlation with biodiversity. This means that where biodiversity exists, the diversity of language and dialect also exists and is embedded within traditional knowledge system. Therefore, traditional knowledge system is an outcome of the influence of nature–culture relationship, which is the means for wellbeing of nature and human beings.

### **Northeast India – interconnection of place and people**

The Northeast of India, covering an area of 262,379 square kilometres (sq km), comprises eight states of India. The entire region has a diverse geo-physical background with 60 percent of its total geographical area being hilly terrain (Eastern Himalayas and Northeastern Hills) and 12 percent plateau; the rest 28 percent are plains.<sup>2</sup> It is rich in diversity of flora and fauna, which is the abode of many endangered,

threatened and range restricted species at the confluence of the Indian, Indo-Malayan and Indo-Chinese bio-geographical realms. It also exhibits intermixing of the Himalayan and peninsular Indian elements. The region has two sub-centres of the Indo-Burma centre of plant origin in the world, viz., the Eastern Himalayas and North Eastern Hills.<sup>3</sup> The Northeast is geologically sensitive with fault line, a tectonically originated fracture or break on the ground where the probability of occurrences of earthquakes is high. There are 11 major agro-climatic zones in the region<sup>4</sup>, which represent alpine, sub-tropical, temperate characteristics along with rain shadow areas. It is experienced with the perennial occurrences of natural disasters, including weather and climate related anomalies and climate induced disasters.<sup>5</sup>

The Northeast is also rich with its socio-cultural diversity, principally in the context of indigenous communities. More than 150 major indigenous groups and sub-groups inhabit the region, speaking more than 200 languages and dialects.<sup>6</sup> Each one of these groups has its own cultural way of life with a repository of traditional knowledge. In the above perspectives, the traditional knowledge practices among all these communities vary with their geo-ecological conditions. However, in each case, every community designs and develops its own way of life with the principles of adaptation with nature in the process of developing a cultural landscape over a natural landscape. So, the traditional knowledge systems of each of the communities is very rich in traditional ecological knowledge, which vividly reflects in its spatio-temporal framework of design and decision making, e.g. adaptation of own natural resource classification systems – reflected in the traditional land use classifications and also in traditional calendar systems for planning day to day activities with seasonal perspectives. It is overt with diversity of agricultural systems, food systems, along with adaptation of values for nature and elements of nature. Notably, every such practice is coded in its respective language or dialect so there is

specific name for each practice. It is basically the own system of observation, classification, experimentation, analysis and interpretation of the peoples or communities, which can be considered as indigenous methodological framework for developing information and knowledge and skilling of a community. Thus, it has a strong base of logical reasoning for developing their own viewpoints. Such logics are based on the approaches, which are similar to contemporary fuzzy logic<sup>7</sup> approach. In this case, indigenous practitioners observe and analyse the relativeness, comparison, commonness and prevalence with references to their mental map developed through experiential learning. Furthermore, based on such learning, empirical trial has been carried out, which is repetitive in nature and such empirical observation further strengthen the inferences drawn for decision making. Therefore, in contemporary inquiry about ecology and ecosystem, traditional knowledge systems are considered as important source of information for predictive modelling approaches to know about bio-resources (its distribution, status etc.) and ecological services.<sup>8</sup>

### **Perceiving and believing - nature**

The perpetual interface of the people with nature developed the former's belief systems around the latter; the focus was on eternal connection with nature, which was considered supreme. This shaped the tradition of nature worshipping. These practices are echoed in day to day practices and occasional ceremonial practices. As a result, sun, moon, sky, mountain, hills, forest, rivers, lakes, different plants and animals become sacred. For example, the Khasi ethnic group of Meghalaya, sharing its border with Bangladesh, upholds an eco-theandric vision of reality where God, Nature and Human form one single and indivisible entity. Earth is honoured and idealised as 'Meriramew', literary meaning Mother Earth. Likewise, the Khasis also believe in mountain or hill spirit (Lei Lum), river spirit (Lei Wah) and water spirit (Lei Umtong)<sup>9 10 11</sup>. Similar



practices are observed among the Tangkhul Naga, an ethnic group living mainly in Ukhrul district of Manipur along the Indo-Myanmar border areas. They have also included mountain spirit (Kaphung Kameo), river spirit (Kong Kameo) and spirit of the forest (Khara Ngahong Kameo) into their beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Such nature-centric beliefs are also reflected in totemic practices of different communities, which are related to their clan system and kinship. For example, among the Karbis, one of the major ethnic groups living mainly in the Karbi Hills of Assam, an integral part of Kaziranga-Karbi-Anglong landscape of the region, the racket tailed drongo (Vojaro), hornbill (Vo-Terrang), woodpecker (Voleng), monitor lizard (Chehang), pangolin (Karpu) and crab (Chehe) are amulets of different clans and sub-clans.<sup>13</sup> There are also examples of kinship relationship with wildlife. The Idu-Mishmis of Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh consider the tiger as their brother. They believe that tiger and man are born from the same mother.<sup>14</sup> These beliefs echo the traditional values around nature and wildlife among the indigenous communities.

Such values are symbolically entwined with different folk and cultural practices like the folk festivals of Bhatheli (an area based celebration during spring season participated by all the caste and class people of the village or cluster of villages) in the southern part of old Kamrup district of Assam and Bah-gosaiutsav of SaraniaKochari of Assam, where bamboo is symbolised as God, a sign of productivity.<sup>15</sup> These approaches of appreciating, learning and worshiping the nature lead to biomimicry in textile and handloom practices of many indigenous communities of the Northeast, particularly in the aspects of colour selection, developing motifs and in turn development of dress codes.<sup>16</sup> These practices, together embalming the environmental ethos and ethics, offer a new path of nature conservation. Hence, observation of tradition with an attitude of learning may accentuate the tip offs for enduring nature.<sup>17</sup>

## Traditional knowledge systems and natural resource management

58 Traditional practices of landscaping and waterscaping by indigenous communities of the Northeast reflect the rich ecological knowledge systems, where they adopt the management regimes relating to forestry, land use, agriculture, animal husbandry and host of other primary and secondary livelihood activities.<sup>18</sup> These practices exhibit terrain conditions and watershed property in designing their activity spaces, which support sustainability of ecosystem services (e.g. quality of soil, land, water, food, fodder, fuel, fiber, medicine, material for building and cultural practices).

Land categorisation for land use planning and management is vivid among the Dimasa<sup>19</sup>, Tangsa Naga, Tangkhul Naga<sup>20</sup>, Loi<sup>21</sup>, Monpa<sup>22 23</sup> communities. The Dimasa community of Borail Hills of Dima Hasao district of Assam classifies land into six different categories. Three categories of forest (viz. Hadmsa, Hagra and Hagrama) play a critical role in maintaining ecological services to jhum (a slash, burn and shift agriculture practice in forest areas) plots, homestead areas and wet-paddy fields. Among the Tangsa Nagas in the Patkai Hill area of Tinsukia district of Assam lands are divided into zones: The core area is gimrouck (homestead), surrounded by hapkud (forest) and thereafter himsea (agricultural land), which is again surrounded by lingjung (woodland); so two natural vegetations cover the area in the village. This helps in maintaining ecological services through creation of watershed regimes. Similarly, among the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur, a village has six categories of land, viz. naidaka-phung (community forest), nadala (terrace field), hala (jhum), luira (jhum fallow) and kha (homestead area). It is noteworthy that in the cases of Dimasas, Tangsa Nagas and Tangkhul Nagas, traditionally forest is maintained as a village boundary, which creates an ecological continuum and cultural buffer with neighboring villages.

In the case of Loi community of Manipur, land is classified as per topography: The hilltop is maintained as succession of natural vegetation called as 'pamlow', the next category of land in the slope is 'inkhon' used for homestead development. This is followed by 'fawren', an area of high quality of soil with biomass and moisture, which is used for agriculture. The next slope 'anganpow', is arable land, but its productivity is lower than fawren land. 'Tawthehi', which is the marshy area, is located at the bottom of the slope. Here, topography and slope conditions are considered by the traditional practitioners to define land characteristics that determine decisions for land uses.

In the case of Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, land resources possessed by a family are both from the father's and mother's side. Usually these are agricultural lands locally called as 'khreimapas' but based on the mode of transfer names change, where father's lands are called 'phasui' and the lands transferred from the mother are called 'masui'. There are practices of transferring land to both son and daughter. Phasui land is usually transferred from father to son and masui land is transferred from mother to daughter. It is a gendered dimension of access to land resources through traditional institutions of land ownership. Moreover, the Monpa tribe of the district has two land ownership patterns, gosa (individual land) and maang-sa (community land). Usually land under individual ownership is used for khareisa (agriculture) and parmong (private forestry). The community land in turn is used for naa/ borong (forest) and bro-sa (pasture land). Community institutions of the respective villages collect fees (either as kind or cash) from persons from other villages collecting firewood from naa/ borong or grazing their animal in bro-sa. Such a defined management regime for natural assets using fees helps in managing conflict among the villages. It is noteworthy that forests are usually common in village land uses of indigenous communities of the North-east India. Most of such forests are treated as community

conserved areas as they play a very significant role in biodiversity conservation and maintaining ecological services.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, in terms of natural resource management, water-scape practices vividly reflect the strong traditional practices of irrigation, water harvesting and management among the indigenous communities of the Northeast. Such practices have a strong foundation on observational and experiential understanding of the environmental context of the locality and accordingly many indigenous communities of Northeast India design their structural interventions and associated management regime entwined with cultural ethos and practices. The 'dong' irrigation practices of Bodo community in the 'bhabhar' zone in the foothills of the Bhutan Himalayas and 'longsor' irrigation of Karbi community in rain-shadow zone of Karbi-Anglong are two examples of adaptation to environmental challenges based on collectivism. The bhabhar is a zone with boulders, stone and sand where water percolates faster creating surface water crisis. Here, the Bodo community adopts the dong system—developing 'bandh' (checkdam) with wooden triangular baskets, filled with boulders and standing on tripods. Such baskets are placed in rows along the main stream of the river to divert water and channelize it to man-made conduits that help in holding surface water and distributing through the canal system. This practice has been quite successful in Subankhata in Baska district of the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam. Located on the foothills bordering Bhutan, Subankhata has managed to supply water to its 36,000 inhabitants and their agriculture through dong system with the cooperation of its 95 villages and 13 management committees. This is an example of water collectives and water governance based on traditional knowledge based practices<sup>25 26</sup>. On the other hand, longsor in the rain-shadow area of Western Karbi-Anglong is developed on a landscape approach, by restoring hill streams. Here hill top catchment areas are conserved as sacred forest, the intermediate slope is used for agro-forestry and water

from the stream is transferred through bamboo pipes to the paddy fields. Some of the bamboo piped water is used for drip irrigation in between. It is an example of traditional drip irrigation.<sup>27</sup>

Water is also used for local level energy application through chuskur (traditional water mill). It is an indigenous technique of the Monpa community of West Kameng and Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Here, flowing water is used to power a traditional grinder for grinding millet, buck wheat, maize and barley grains. Water from streams and rivulets is diverted through a manmade conduit to the water powered mill. This traditional technology has a low carbon footprint and maintenance cost, and carries only the handprint of community knowledge and culturally tuned management system.<sup>28 29</sup>

Also traditional practices of animal husbandry play a very critical role through collective management and individual visioning to ensure supply of food and material to households and villages. Such practices are reflected in 'mesilakhor' system of Rabha community in Goalpara district of Assam, where cattle of the entire village is managed by Lakhors, who are from the agricultural landless families. Their services are compensated by the rest of the farming families through payment of crops they harvest and based on the number of cattle they own. Similar approaches of cattle management are practised by the Dimasa community in Assam, when standing crops are in the field and among the Garo ethnic group of Meghalaya, while managing pasture land in jhum fallow areas.<sup>30</sup> In the high altitudinal alpine zones of the region, trans-human practices are there for rearing of yaks and sheep, particularly among the Monpas of West Kameng and Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh, where people involved in this livelihood are called Brokpa. It is considered as an occupational category in Monpa traditional system.<sup>31</sup>

There also are temporal perspectives of natural resource management practices, which are based on the traditional calendar system of different indigenous communities. Mostly, the lunar cycle is considered for developing a calendar system where months are defined with required natural resource management and agricultural activities. Such practices are very common among the communities like Dimasa<sup>32</sup>, Karbi<sup>33</sup>, Mizo<sup>34</sup> and Adi<sup>35</sup>. In all the cases, seasonality is coded with bio-indicators, considering phenological aspects of different flora (flowering, fruiting) and fauna (behaviour, activity). The seasons are defined for agriculture and festivals along with preparedness practices for adoption/risk reduction/resilience development with anomalies of weather, natural disaster, pest problems on agriculture and diseases. Therefore, the traditional calendar is also a tool for risk reduction, adaptation and resilient development.

Aforesaid examples are glimpses of some local ecological knowledge of the communities reflected in their natural resource management practices, where application of traditional technology is observed as in the case of dong, longsor and chuskur. In reality, traditional ecological knowledge, traditional technological knowledge, and traditional value and ethics work together, which ultimately frame the traditional way of life of the people and that emerged with cultural ethos.

### **Way to look forward in the context of overt challenges**

In the midst of these centuries old rich and wiser ecological practices of traditional indigenous society, threats have emerged because of market based economic drivers, where ecological and cultural elements are converted to commodities and where defining market prices for everything is devaluing cultural ethos and ethics, dejecting the association of indigenous communities with nature. This is multiplied through growth focused development models, which superficially consider human and natural dimensions, without

realising the involvement of the indigenous communities. The traditional knowledge based resource inventories are missing in such models. Over the period, such a modular approach of economic instruments emerged with policy and market failures regarding public goods and services have led to negative environmental externalities consequently creating conflict around natural resources<sup>36</sup>, inability to pay proper care for the natural assets<sup>37</sup>, displacing traditional knowledge through planned interventions for resource extraction, knowledge and culture based colonisation. The sad result has been a generalisation of everyone's needs, without due consideration of geo-ecological context, social and cultural milieu.

To prevent its further destruction, the Northeast of India needs to be developed as a 'Special Natural Economic Zone'<sup>38</sup>, with all cares for forests and people<sup>39 40</sup>, based on the foundation of conservation livelihood<sup>41</sup> and crafted on the principle of regenerative bio-economy considering the landscape as the unit of planning and operation. Such endeavour mandatorily needs to incorporate community owned business/ entrepreneurial models. Simultaneously, there is a necessity to introduce heritage education programmes, incorporating all the aspects of natural and cultural heritage of Northeast India for empowering the younger generation about their own knowledge system. Such heritage education programmes need to be designed on the principle of inquiry based integrated learning. Such processes may be able to create new ways to protect the identity of the indigenous communities of the region as well as activate a process for the wellbeing of the people and of nature.

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Andreas Weber



# SHARING LIFE

The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity

 **HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG**  
**INDIA**

This publication was commissioned by  
the India Office of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.  
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Author - Andreas Weber  
Graphics - Abhishek Chauhan  
Copyediting - Priya Ranjan Sahu

This publication is part of a assemblage curated on the  
topic of *Alternative Worldviews* on [www.in.boell.org](http://www.in.boell.org)  
September 2020

Andreas Weber

## **Sharing Life**

The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity





*“Traditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature – however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be – is never truly alone.”*

**Richard Nelson**

*“Whoever told people that ‘mind’ means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles and grasses.”*

**Dōgen**

*“There is no community unless you are willing to be wounded.”*

**Bayo Akomolafe**

This essay proposes animism as an attitude in order to readjust humanities' relationship to earth – the shared life of human and non-human beings. I explore emerging ideas in anthropology and biosemiotics, which highlight the animistic understanding that the material world displays subjectivity, feeling, and personhood. The insistence of western culture to treat aliveness as a subjective illusion is a colonisation of the living cosmos, which severs humans from their own liveliness and destroys the lives of other beings – humans and non-humans alike. This essay asks animistic cultures for guidance in a process of western self-decolonisation. The search for animistic perspectives and practices is intended as a dialogue in which western thinking is willing to undergo radical – and sometimes painful – change. Animism can enable us to imagine a truly new worldview for our epoch, the Anthropocene, where human and non-human agencies contribute to a fecund earth.

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# 1

## On Writing Animism: Undoing Western Logic from Within

77

*"If 'cutting trees into parts' epitomises the modernist epistemology, 'talking with trees,' I argue, epitomises ... animistic epistemology...*

*To 'talk with a tree' – rather than 'cut it down' – is to perceive what it does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility."*

**Nurit Bird-Davis**

The animistic worldviews of indigenous peoples contain practices and knowledge that can be of crucial guidance for the multiple crises of our current time, which has been named the Anthropocene<sup>1</sup>. These crises are manifold, but related: They all concern the breakdown of participation and equality, be it towards non-human beings or other humans. The dilemma of the Anthropocene could be defined as a relationship disaster on various levels, a dissolution of the collective. This is strongly related to the core conditions of western thinking. Western thinking tends to be antagonistic and resource-oriented, whereas animistic thinking tends to be inclusive and community-oriented. It does not create the split into actors and environment, which haunts western culture and its treatment of non-human domains of reality.

Adopting this stance, or at least reviewing its usefulness for a shift of the occidental approach to reality, could be a major breakthrough for social and ecological sustainability strategies. And it could lead to a cultural shift: A shift to the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this text I will use the terms "animistic" and "indigenous" interchangeably.

perspective that this world is profoundly alive (instead, as the mainstream holds, that it is dead, a “mere thing”, through and through) could lay the groundwork for those “unprecedented” changes in society and economy, which have been called forward in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018 report, and which, no doubt, are required.

This essay, therefore, will explore animistic ways and highlight their differences to a western style approach to reality. Obviously, there are many indigenous people, and equally many animistic cosmologies. Here, I follow others (Kohn 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2016) in suggesting that there is nonetheless a common ground of indigenous thinking and acting, which stands in opposition to western thought. From a western perspective it is helpful to look at these defining divergences, at the grand structures, in order to adopt a more critical point of view on the own cosmology.

For half a century, part of the western fashion of enlightening and teaching non-western peoples was to explain to them the idea of what later was to be called “sustainability”. This has influenced ecopolitics in the global south to a huge degree. It meant to declare that the old ways were childish superstitions, which needed to be discarded for a scientific handle on the world, and to put trees, rivers, and other living beings into the status of mere things and then proceed to their protection – often bluntly against the living relationships of humans with these beings.

This essay is an attempt to turn the inquiry around: It assumes that the idea of treating the living planet as an assortment of objects and then try to protect the more precious of them (who decides?) does not work. Sustainability cannot cure the “health” of biomes without taking into account the livelihoods of the humans. Conversely, the ways, and thoughts, and desires of non-

human beings cannot be omitted, if the whole of a given community-in-country, humans and otherwise, is meant to thrive. Therefore, it is worthwhile – indeed, it might be the only way out – to turn around and look into a direction the western worldview has deliberately avoided for at least the last 500 years. It is the perspective that the world is alive. It is the perspective that the world is animated. To turn our eyes to this view is the goal of this essay.

There is an intrinsic contradiction in the circumstance that a white male biologist, philosopher and nature writer from the North (me)<sup>2</sup> is composing an essay about the need to rediscover the animistic reality of living in relationships within a collective of life. The contradiction lies in the fact that I am trained in the machinery of western thinking. This thinking – and its tool, the discursive, competitive, and ultimately eliminative argument, which is usually laid out in essays or books – is what brought animistic worldmaking down. So the aim of this piece of writing seems to be an impossible task. Still, it is necessary to tackle this challenge. In the end, western thinking needs to be undone from within the west. As any other healing process, self-decolonisation can only be brought about by having those give way who are holding up the restraints of instrumental reason. And those are us, the thinkers, artists, and politicians of the west. So the task might seem impossible. But at the same time it is unavoidable. We need to try to approach it as truthfully, as open-minded, and as accepting to the manifold ensuing flaws as we can.

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2 In the following I will use the terms “from the North”, “western”, “occidental” interchangeably. They all refer to a heritage of thought and argument – and, more broadly, a metaphysics, which Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) has labelled the “Western Cognitive Empire”. Anyone who adheres to the according set of beliefs is called a “westerner” in the following discussion. Obviously we cannot ascribe a clear identity – “westerner”, “adherent to the cognitive empire” – in this way, but we are all to a bigger or lesser degree influenced by the according concepts. For this reason I have decided to use the terms in a rather broad sense. The particular way I am using these attributions will become clear in the text.

Western thinking is based on the assumption that there is a sphere of reason – be it semiotic or mathematical – which is the only serious vantage point from which to sort the threads of the fabric of our cosmos. Already the attempt of a description will procreate the western ideas of how to structure, which have a lot to do with particular dichotomies (mind-matter, actor-object, culture-nature) on which the western cosmology rests. Everything in the mind of a thinker applying western style arguments hence becomes incorporated into the western hegemony, so the warning goes, or is rendered invisible by it. A worldview, or better a host of different worldviews, which thrive through direct communication and felt exchange with the non-human persons, can ipso facto not be described in terms of western scientific discourse. And, even more dangerous: If somebody deeply anchored in this discourse tries to trace this other cosmos, will it, this other reality, inevitably be sucked into the western model – a world split into (western human) subjects, and the remainder of mere objects – and hence be invalidated, and, worse still, again colonised?

These are extremely necessary cautions. Still, in order to step out of the trap of the western cognitive model (western – human – subjects here, mere objects there), western thinking needs to be opened up to what it is not. The best way to do this is to start a (painful, and painfully slow) journey of un-learning of what the western cognitive hegemony is about.

This is a two-way-process, consisting of a radical self-questioning of western thinking, and of an invitation to those who are not entirely trapped inside the western discourse to assume the role of mentors. I wish the essay to be understood in this way: As an attempt of a western mind to question himself. As an open query, and a request for mentoring. As an attempt of self-decolonisation in need of guidance. We know, as in any healing processes, that the goal dreamt up ahead is never wholly reached. But healing is the process itself, not



the end of it.

So I want to invite all who are (at least partly) living in worlds, which are still shared between human and non-human persons, to chime in, take my hand, direct my gaze, and lead me, the author, and us, the readers, under a tree, where relations are not analysed, but felt, and made. Please take this piece of writing as a question, not as an answer. I have written it as one loop in an unending process of learning and unlearning, a process that is intrinsically shared and thus dependent on mutual transformation.

## 2

### Mutuality and the Ecological Good

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*"Interaction is more fundamental than perception."*

**Adrian Harris**

In March 2020 during the global pandemic, humans in most parts of the world stopped moving. The busy global economy came to a halt – with consequences, which cannot yet be foreseen.

What stopped are some of the most prominent activities of the western way of interacting with the world: Extensive travelling, most of the world's air traffic, incessant trade and consumption, and a host of personal pursuits. Near to no planes in the skies above industrial centres, few cars on the streets, silence and an unusual clean air, in which city dwellers could hear the vocalisations of wild animals with whom they cohabit, of birds and insects, some for the first time in years.

Humans were asked to stop their activities in the name of something, which had not been in the focus of western – and global – policy in the last decades: Community. Lockdown was not done in order to push the economy through individual competition, but to protect others. And in the ensuing silence the wider community was felt: The silence of the stars at night, the buzzing bumblebees the Indian myna's calls.

This was not a romantic moment, however. For millions in poorer countries, the stay-at-home-orders are an existential threat of misery and even of starvation. Many poor people and migrant workers do not even have a home where to stay. Humans, forced to sit and wait in an enclosed space with

others are suffering from depression and “camp fever”, violence in families has surged.

The lockdown shone a light on the very social nature of humans. It reminded of a fact that neoliberalism continuously veils: The individual can only live if the collective, which she constitutes with all others, is able to thrive. The virus managed to have humans do what they were not able to do on their own: Sit down, be quiet, and behave so that others in the community are protected. We did not chose to do so, that’s admitted, and we hope to get back to normalcy as soon as we can.

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There is a danger that the readiness of humans to stop pursuing their private goals – and even stop securing their livelihoods through work – can be exploited by totalitarian regimes. But this does not change the observation that humans act not from a purely egocentric standpoint. They act from the experience of connection, from the experience that each and any represents the collective.

The virus has temporarily changed human ecology. Instead of devouring everything that moves, individuals have slowed down. They granted others space (quite literally, queuing at street kitchens and even at polling stations in safe distances), they sat and listened. The majority of the world population thus responded to what is the most important, though often unacknowledged, problem of global western societies – namely how to relate to those who are weaker, who are more vulnerable, and, from an ecological viewpoint, even to those who are not human at all, the other living beings. Without great discussion the central principle of our neoliberal world society had been put aside. Under an existential threat, something deeper emerged, a sort of an agreement about how to behave in order to protect life. In this, we do not only protect ourselves, but also the web of living relationships in which we are embedded. This is a very far-reaching

gesture. It is a wordless answer to the dilemma of how to treat the vulnerable other, an answer which we could not give from the standpoint of a purely economical view.

Some months deeper into lockdown, it has become even more visible that the pandemic revolves around the subject of “community”. It exposes to what degree community has been perverted and neglected in modern societies. We see that the poorest members of the world’s societies bear the brunt of the pandemics, and that minorities, which are already discriminated against, are disproportionately affected by damage from the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). We see that racism – which is daily business in most nations – is literally deadly. We see that the lockdown has actually exposed how much societies are divided into classes (those who can afford to stay inside, and those who cannot afford it). In India, we also see how the decision makers have used the lockdown to rampage over nature even more than before, since some long pending contracts were signed for exploitation of resources in biodiversity sensitive areas.

### **COVID-19 as an ecological stress test**

The coronavirus shows that the destruction and neglect of social and ecological mutuality – the foundation of life on earth – is the biggest problem we face, and the biggest threat to survival. So we can observe that the tragedy of community is not only a social fact, but more: An ecological disaster.

Lockdown has not only been a political, but rather an ecological answer to a sudden menace to life, to individual life, which springs from living together. Ecology has taken over the conceptual space. It turns out that we are inextricably linked to a living community. If push comes to shove, we protect it, accepting even damages elsewhere. And if the community is unable to protect its weaker individuals (in case of

social “minorities”), they are exposed to death and suffering.

The COVID-19 outbreak shows us another thing: The community we are dependent on is bigger than the collective of humans. It includes the whole living earth. The community our social collective belongs to is the collective of life. Our individual existence is granted by partaking in this collective, by taking from and contributing to the mutuality it is built upon.

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Humanity’s global reaction to COVID-19 is an ecological event. The outbreak is not only an ecological happening in itself; it has also an ecological source. The fact that every human is (or was) personally menaced by this catastrophe should not seduce us into thinking that the disease concerns only public health and therefore is a human-only problem. To the contrary. The outbreak needs to be understood as an ecological disaster.

There is little doubt that novel coronavirus is an animal virus that crossed over into humans. The coronavirus outbreak is a consequence of the destruction of habitats, of the mass consumption of animals from rare species, of the human encroachment on what is not human. Ecological destruction is the contrary of reciprocity. It is, therefore, the opposite of what human society is forced to prioritise in the coronavirus pandemic: Stepping back and caring for the others.

The COVID-19 outbreak can be seen as a consequence of our global society’s refusal to grant others (humans and non-human living beings) reciprocity and space. It is a symptom of a stance built into the objectifying, globalist ways of thinking: It says that granting space is not needed, as those others are just things, and things can be rearranged most efficiently by the forces of the market.

The coronavirus pandemic proves this view wrong. It shows

that reciprocity is a key ecological quality, and it shows that reciprocity – granting the others space to live in order to keep our own – is asked of us as a crucial ecological contribution.

86 COVID-19 shows us that reciprocity is a necessity that rules our lives. We can only exist in ecological mutuality. We are part of the ecosphere. We are nourished by it, and we perish through its viruses. Human beings do not stand apart from non-human beings, but are part and parcel of ecological exchange. The virus reminds us of a simple truth that has been ignored. It tells us that we are part of the collective of life, and that we are, as all living beings, mortal – partaking in a cycle of birth and death that provides life with fecundity. The coronavirus pandemic can therefore provide a deep animistic insight.

### **Microbial deconstruction of the Western Cognitive Empire**

Granting others life as a key command of organising one's own existence, and of building society, was never a concern of market thinking. To the contrary, it is deemed a hindrance. Reality here is construed as a dog-eats-dog world (according to the "natural state", described by Thomas Hobbes in his book *Leviathan*). Reciprocity with the living world in this thinking is denounced as a naïve dream at best, as a state of crudeness that must be left behind. Humanity needs to agree to a "social contract" (Hobbes) precisely in order to protect against mutuality.

In the dominant tradition of socio-economic thinking, the social contract was supposed to secure stable livelihoods for individual humans (by surrendering to the power of the state). This stability could not be achieved "naturally" through the human competence of granting others their space for life. It needed a contract (actually the consent of society to be kept

in a state of slavery by the sovereign). The social contract had one overarching rationale: It created the conditions for commerce, for material exchange through unmitigated competition of individuals seeking personal profits.

The world of the social contract builds on two pillars. One is the material world, composed of dead things – called nature. And the second is human society, built upon the contract to fight that material nature in order to pursue individual goods and through this detach human lives from material reality. This is the classical dualistic split, which still deeply informs the ways of western thinking: The separation of culture from nature and a re-definition of non-human beings into “things”.

Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) has termed this setting the “Western Cognitive Empire”. French sociologist Bruno Latour (2011) has described creation of “monsters” as one of the main occupations of this empire. Monsters are born when we split the living world (which creates life from itself if it is only offered reciprocity) into the two incommensurable and hostile domains of nature and society. Despite the claim, however, those domains can never be truly separated. The COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example for this. In the outbreak, the material processes change culture and society – and these feed back on the material course of the pandemics. Nature – a virus from wild animals – dictates how society behaves.

The coronavirus destroys the idea that society can treat “things out there” as it wishes. It even destroys the idea that by sustainable actions – by creating larger and more efficient preserves and buffer zones between society and “nature” – we can handle the problems created by humanity; sustainable practices also follow the belief that the world consists of objects and therefore still treat the non-human participants of reality – other beings and the proliferating powers of the earth system – as things. The coronavirus teaches us that

this domain is not made of objects, but of others, who need to be treated with the right amount of reciprocity.

The Anthropocene will not be, inversely to what many may have expected, the extension of the western rational regime to a stewardship over all of “nature”. Rather, the advent of the Anthropocene marks the end of the western cognitive dominion. The Anthropocene is the age in which societies experience that they do not stand above “nature”, and that, even more important, standing within “nature” (standing inside life) has a set of rules which, if society does not comply, will stop our partaking in this very life. The RNA-based actor coronavirus is the paradigmatic anthropogenic agent.

### **The family of being(s)**

A growing number of natural disasters make us understand that we are part of one interconnected whole (think forest fires in Australia and California, disturbed monsoon patterns, cyclones, devastating droughts like in the summers of 2018 and 2019 in Europe). But none of them are as directly threatening to you and me as is COVID-19. Through this, the virus offers a community ethics. The pandemic shows us how to behave in the right way.

This right way – granting the other the space of life – is summarised in the famous Kisuaheli term “Ubuntu”, meaning “You are, therefore I am”. This is the thinking of reciprocity, the thinking that we participate in a collective, which is creating life together, the idea that we are collectively responsible for life, not only for ours, but also for that of the others, and for the fecundity of life as such.

The thinking underlying Ubuntu is animism. Animism is the idea that the remainder of the world is not made of mute objects, but of persons. Persons have interests and needs. They are agents. An animistic approach believes that we



need to establish reciprocity with these persons. We need to share with them in order to be granted our place and, even more important, in order to allow this place to bring forth life in continuity. In the pandemics, the world is stirring, and we keep still, and what emerges in front of our eyes, through our motionless state, is the need to share this world's aliveness with all other persons, human and non-human, of which it consists.

Animism, the cosmology of indigenous peoples, is the most radical form to think and to enact reciprocity among beings – human and non-human persons. Animism has been misrepresented for centuries within the western cognitive empire. The idea, however, that naïve “native” humans live in a “state of nature”, adulating spirits and demons in trees, rivers and mountains is a false myth. This misrepresentation stems from projecting the western cognitive mindset on what the so-called “primitive people” are doing, when they e.g. ritually give thanks to a tree-being.

Through regarding colonial reason as supreme, we have unlearned what ecological knowledges and alternative worldviews entail. A central principle of these knowledges is that they are not actually about knowing in a western sense, but about sharing a world. Animism accepts that all beings co-create a world that is continuously producing life, and takes responsibility to keep this cosmic fecundity going. It understands the cosmos not as made up of things, but of agents, which all resemble humans in the fact that they, like us, crave for life, express their needs, and are required to interact with one another.

In a cosmos of relationships, reciprocity is required in order to thrive, and it is required from all sides. In a world of connections, we are not atomistic individuals set against one another, but on a deep level we collectively create one coherent process of life. The collective is as important as the

individual. It is the other side of it. This collective is not only human, but made of every being and every force of reality.

If we look from a structural point of view, an ecosystem is the embodiment of reciprocity. It consists of a multitude of beings related in endless ways. Ecological life is always lived in relationships with others. An ecosystem is a commons, shared and brought fourth by all its participants. It is not an assemblage of egoistic agents. For a long time, Darwinian economics of nature have overstressed competition (and hence have introduced Hobbes' "social contract" as a teleonomic horizon in nature) and not paid due attention to the host of dependencies within which competitions play out. (For a deeper discussion see Weber 2013 & 2019).

So a view to substitute the crumbling western cognitive empire is already at hand. It is the etiquette of reciprocity we can find unconsciously executed in ecosystems – and culturally instituted in societies, which have managed to live in mutuality with those ecosystems for a long time. To explore this view, the west will need to step out of its intrinsic supposition that "western rationality" after all is the way the world works – and that all other ideas of reality are mild or severe superstitions.

Scientific anthropology attempts more and more to take the perspectives of animistic cultures seriously and to meet them on a level equal to western science. A leading author of this shift is anthropologist Edoardo Kohn (2013), who in his book "How Forests Think", sets out to literally explore the thought of forests – instead of "what indigenous people think about forests". Others, like Edoardo Viveiros de Castro (2017) and Philippe Descola (2013) provide similar findings in the camp of anthropology. Authors like Donna Haraway (2016) and Timothy Morton (2017) are preparing the same soil from the viewpoint of critical theory. For all of them, the world itself is acting according to material and subjective

standpoints at all times – a perspective that for the first time in western discourse had been proposed by Bruno Latour (1993).

The animistic attitude, attempting to enact the productivity of the cosmos and to share it among its participants, contrasts the basic principles of the western cognitive model. Animism is not about material objects being possessed by spirits. It is about constructing a culture on principles that enable reciprocity, building on a cosmology, which integrates the experience of being part of a fecund collective. These principles play out in different key fields, which are all crucial areas of conflict in the Anthropocene. It turns out that most conflicts of the Anthropocene boil down to difficulties in maintaining good relations through sharing the cosmos. So most of the current predicaments need to be addressed through healing relationships; this is what animism is about.

### 3

## What is Animism?

*"Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others."*

**Graham Harvey**

Occidental thinking separates nature and society ("material objects" and "human culture") into two different areas that cannot be mapped onto one another. Animistic thinking addresses these two realms as one. The world is material and embodied and it is personal and subjective at the same time, everywhere. Animistic thinking perceives subjectivity and matter not as exclusive and contradictory, but as co-present. Therefore, indigenous thought takes the world – humans, plants, animals, rivers, rocks, rain, and spirits – as a society of "persons", which are in a constant becoming-together. The human role is to facilitate this becoming through participating in it in a benevolent way, to make the world (as a society of subjects) fecund, able to give life. Existence is increase; all actions are valued in their capacity to give life.

Indigenous worldviews are not assortments of theoretical knowledge over facts. They do not separate observation from ethos. The animistic cosmos is always performative. Its members enact creation by fulfilling their due role in it. In indigenous thinking, you are a worldview, you represent cosmos, so you behave as such. You are kin to all beings, and all beings (organisms, rivers, mountains) are persons. Indigenous cosmologies evade those rifts in western thinking that in the present day lead to the current ecological and social

dilemmas and their various combinations (how the commons of the atmosphere should be distributed between its different participants, for instance).

Indigenous worldviews and practices hold inspirations to creatively reimagine the very problems occidental mainstream thinking and acting has run into. At the same time, indigenous cosmologies suggest these new vistas not as theoretical knowledge, or epistemological frame (and ensuing prohibitions to think otherwise), but as practices of collective action. For the cognitive culture of the west, opening up to animistic practices of worldmaking and world-understanding promises to be the starting point into a profound – and urgently needed – transformation.

### **Why animistic thinking in the Anthropocene?**

The Anthropocene is marked by a critical shift in the status of nature. Nature is not longer experienced as outside of human subjectivity and culture, but deeply entangled with it. This shift manifests itself not only conceptually, but also physically and politically as climate and biodiversity emergency. The earth system is in a transition to a different state, thereby inevitably foregoing many of its current lifeforms. In occidental thinking, the defining feature of this catastrophic shift is the fact that human traces can be found everywhere in the biogeosphere – hence the term “Anthropocene”.

Through this, human civilisation discovers itself as enmeshed with everything else in the earth system (Horn & Bergthaller 2019). We realise that there is no inside or outside, only a huge mutual network of reciprocal transformation. The findings of the Anthropocene, therefore, help to correct a centuries-old dualistic misconception of the cosmos. Instead of seeing the planet as a passive rock circulating through space, the earth system as a whole is perceived as an actor, as “Gaia” (Latour 2018). Even matter is re-evaluated

as “vibrant” and agential (Barad 2013, Bennett 2015). In the emerging new view the cosmos has basically become alive – and human culture seems to be but one of the factors contributing to this aliveness.

94 For western mainstream thinking, this is a new, and often startling, situation. The neat separation line between agents (humans) and things (matter, nature, objects) has dissolved. Even the demarcation between practice and theory has blurred: Theoretical assumptions do produce physical changes, as they change the way civilisation deals with the physical environment and make this environment “act back” in specific ways. The human impact on the earth system has been so massive that its consequences have empirically disproven the working hypothesis of western technical civilisation, namely, that humans are the sole agents in a universe consisting only of things.

This is the due occasion where the cornucopia of indigenous cosmologies needs to be put centre stage. All the more, as these cosmologies represent an Anthropocene thinking *avant la lettre*. For tens or even hundreds of millennia these worldviews have been enacted according to continuity between “nature” and “culture”, following the principle that theory is already practice, believing that the world is full of agents, and humans are only some of them.

So, paradoxically, the techno-semiotic demons of civilisation have unleashed a very old way of thinking/ acting. The Anthropocene discovers an animistic baseline in our semio-culturally embodied reality. Indigenous cultures have never discarded this vision. From a contemporary standpoint, their concepts sound extremely modern. This insight should deeply humble westerners.

For animists, the world is a profoundly relational and social phenomenon. Imagination does have a physical impact.

Everything is alive, and that life comes about only through cooperation. Fecundity is created by collective action. This cosmology has kept the biosphere fertile for at least the last million years, since humans similar to modern mankind first emerged.

All western insights in term of the Anthropocene, therefore, would be painfully incomplete if they did not take into account what indigenous cultures have been exploring for millennia. This exploration, however, must not be another western appropriation. It needs to be a humble act of cleansing western patterns of thought and practice from their underlying assumptions of the few (human, particularly western actors) dominating the many (non-western humans, women, children, other beings, the living earth, forests and streams, matter). The approach to indigenous cosmologies hence needs to be undertaken in the way westerners should approach all other beings: In asking to be received, to be taught, in accepting to know less, rather than more.

If we want to correct western ways through indigenous worldmaking, we better hurry up. Indigenous ways are dwindling. Indigenous people are those suffering most directly from eco-collapse, climate breakdown, and from the political terror, which is the precursor of more serious earth system failures. But this is not an utilitaristic call for urgency. Indigenous ways need to be conserved and protected, because their cosmological aim is to give life, and this is what we should try to do anyway.

### **Areas of animistic thought**

Every culture is different from all others. Still, we can discern a certain basic orientation in indigenous worldmaking, which often is recognised by indigenous actors themselves as “typically indigenous” or “animistic” vs. western (Chimère Diaw, pers. communication, 2019). We can, therefore, compile

a short list of areas in which indigenous thinking particularly differs from western ideas and practices.

Generally speaking, the principles of indigenous thinking circle around a cosmos, which is fundamentally alive because everyone is gifted with life and is in turn required to participate in creating life. Western thinking, however, is built on the assumption that the world is different from human experience in that it is dead and therefore hostile, requiring individuals to compete against one another in order to survive (see Table 1).

Table 1  
Five Core Beliefs of Western versus Indigenous Cultures

<b>Five Core Beliefs of Western Culture</b>	<b>Five Core Beliefs of Indigenous Thinking</b>
1. We are each other's enemy: "I am because you are not".	1. We are required to work together: "I am because you are".
2. Competition lies at the heart of our being.	2. We desire reciprocity.
3. Reality is not alive.	3. Everything has life and inwardness.
4. We can understand reality only by counting and measuring.	4. We can understand reality through participation in its aliveness.
5. We need to avoid our individual death.	5. We need to keep the world fecund.

In indigenous societies, these beliefs play out in different areas of reality. All share the idea that the cosmos is a process providing for everyone and requiring cooperation by everyone. They all assume that there is no split into "nature" and "culture", human-only affairs and dead resources (Descola 2013). Therefore, cooperation is not only required between



humans, but between all beings including humans. Non-human persons provide humans with food; humans are needed to provide non-human beings with the space to flourish.

From this, we can discern some important areas of animistic cosmology/ worldmaking practice:

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### **Everything is first person. The cosmos is a society of beings**

Not only humans are subjects, but animals, plants, rivers, mountains, watersheds, and spirits, too. They all are persons (Harvey 2017). These persons have individuality, agency, and can be addressed by communication (particularly through shamans whose work is needed to keep open the communication with other beings/ spirits). In order to live a fecund life, human actions need to be in balance with the wills and the needs of these other beings. Intricate ways of understanding what these needs are belong to most indigenous cultural practices.

### **Feeling is primordial**

As the cosmos is alive, and its elements are persons with needs and interests, feeling is a predominant tool for orientation and communication. By feeling I understand the perceptive faculties, which are not thinking – e.g. sensation, emotion and intuition (see Harding 2004). In contrast to western thinking, which is suspicious about feeling and at best views it as something secondary, illusionary and strictly individualistic, the indigenous mindset accepts feeling as a primary way through which the collective of beings is approached, understood and addressed. Contact to other beings, and to other humans, is primarily established through feeling. In social circumstances, newcomers often are welcomed by “simply sit and feel connected”. In the western worldview, however, matter, not feeling, is the most basic category.

Matter is what all participants of the cosmos share (in the western mainstream view, stones, ferns, mice and humans are made from matter, but only humans, and maybe higher vertebrates to some degree, feel). In the indigenous cosmos, the fundamental category is feeling (spirits, mountains, mice, stones and men have feelings, only that spirits have no bodies; see Viveiros de Castro 2016). Feeling is not set against the remainder of the material world; rather all bodies potentially feel and feeling persons tend to manifest as bodies. In the animistic cosmos, the world is not only physical, but at the same time always has a feeling- and experiential inside. The world has inwardness with which humans can directly communicate. Spirits are a highly individual expression of this ubiquitous inwardness. Creation stories, like the Aboriginal “Dreamtime” often describe the creational potency of this inwardness, which is not perceived as one historical event, but is still unfolding. The fecund potential of this creative inwardness can be tapped into at any time and must be fed by human activity.

### **Egalitarianism: Cooperation presupposes equality**

Indigenous cosmologies are predominantly egalitarian, as are their ways of organising social life. They are egalitarian, but not undifferentiated. Each individual (and each single species) follows a certain set of rules required by their roles in the mutuality of continuous creation of life. This egalitarianism is mirrored in social rules. Contrary to western beliefs and popular myths, in indigenous societies there rarely is a “chief”, but a frequently a “committee” of chosen elders giving guidance in social life. This egalitarianism is not restricted to the human society, but through rituals and the right everyday behaviour extended to all beings (“persons”) with whom the humans share the world. Egalitarianism is the glue, which holds together the society of being.

## Rejecting narcissism

In the west individual narcissism is considered morally bad but is socially welcomed. Narcissism even has become a tool for social ascent. Though the goals of western institutions try to limit narcissistic behaviour by imposing rules based on morals, narcissism is a practice, which serves the western goal of “winning against the others” well. Indigenous societies regularly block narcissism through intricate mechanisms denying overarching power to individuals (Suzman 2017). Strict rules regarding decency of personal behaviour and the organisation of kinship put a limit to individual ascent to power and fame, and consequently make domination of others more difficult. This cultural practice resonates with the biological observation that narcissism is an “ecological deadly sin”: Every participant in an ecosystem is fed by the whole and ultimately feeds her/ his body back into it. In indigenous cultures, humans often consider themselves as the “youngest sibling” of other species, thus acknowledging the fact that we need to learn and culturally imagine how to live in mutual beneficent exchange with all others.

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## Ethics as morals of reciprocity

In order to keep the world fecund and the cosmos functioning, humans need not only take, but also give. We are fed by a world, which assumes this task within its continuous creation. In order to keep this creation going, humans need to give back to the world, too. This exchange is not viewed and practised as barter, but as the mutual giving of gifts. From an animistic perspective, the gift is the primal reality that makes life possible; only when it is returned and renewed life can flourish (Hyde 1986). This stance explains much of the ubiquitous expressions of gratitude in indigenous cultures, and many rituals in which this gratitude is enacted. A culture of the gift is based on the perception of the world as unconditionally welcoming. From an animistic viewpoint, we are not required to earn our lives, but we are called to give back

what is given in order to keep creation thriving. An ethics of the gift differs from an ethics of individual perfection, which defines the western value system. An ethics of the gift requires commitment to the other, modesty, and the rejection of ego-centredness.

### **Mutual cooperation and the commons**

Because reality is organised as society of beings, lifemaking can only happen within and in accordance to this society. The individual must act in reciprocity with other actors. Individual behaviour is measured as to what degree it resonates with this cooperative worldmaking. Exchange and the distribution of material goods are not conceived of as a fight against scarcity, but as enabling everyone to participate. As the animistic cosmos consists not only of what the western mind calls things, but also of what our worldview accepts as persons, the “cosmic” commons includes everything and everyone. In contrast to the western idea of economy as efficient exchange, in which rational agents (humans) distribute things, the indigenous view sees agents (humans, animals, plants, rivers, spirits) cooperating with other agents. Only one domain of contemporary economic theory describes exchange in a way, which is strikingly similar to how animistic societies organise participation. This is the theory of the commons (Bollier 2014, Felber 2015, Bollier & Helfrich 2019). In economy, the theory and practice of the commons has been gaining traction in the last decade (Weber 2013, Hopkins 2013, Bollier 2014, Felber 2015, Bollier & Helfrich 2019). In a commons economy, agents are not considered as consumers of resources, but as subjects sharing their livelihoods with other subjects (human or non-human). Commons have emerged as a major focus in relation to sharing cultural resources (computer commons like Wikipedia) and making visible the “care work” devoted to family (hence, kin), which is not acknowledged by the current neoliberalist worldview. From a commons standpoint, economic activity should be

reorganised as participation in a common activity that at the same time creates the resource collectively and redistributes it accordingly to its participants. The commons philosophers David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (2019) observe: A commons is not a resource, but a set of relationships. The commoners realize the commons by enacting these relationships. Policy here means to enable a fair participation (through giving and taking). Commons economy is therefore profoundly different from mainstream economy. It does away with the dualistic ontology underlying capitalism. Therefore, a turn towards a commons economy establishes, in the words of commons theorists Bollier & Helfrich (2019), an “Ontoshift”. What this shift is about we can observe in animism.

### **Invocation as ecological practice**

Every practice in indigenous worldmaking stands in relation to the cosmos. Ritual is needed in order to enrich the cosmic fertility. If done wrong (missing out on reciprocity), it can decrease that fertility. The world is ongoing creation, establishing the first principles anew at every moment, and therefore sacred. Human interactions with the world are sacred, too. This sacredness is enacted at various articulating points of human daily practice. It needs to be particularly emphasised at the occasion of major moments of change, where the continuity of a fecund life of the collective is at stake. The existential nexus is sacred precisely because every being (animals, plants, stones, trees, water, and so forth) participates in it. Communication – talk, song, dance, painting, sculpture – can invoke this sanctity, as it makes our interaction with other beings visible and invites them to communicate back. Because of this interaction, which is physical (they feed us) as well as spiritual (they experience existence as inwardness in the same way we do and in mutual resonance), there is no communicative barrier. To address the “spirit of a river” e. g. means to refer to its individuality as part of a process, which is longing for continued creation. Invoking a non-human

member of creation is possible, because all beings (in the sense of the cosmos as a society of beings) share the same substance as members of the society of beings. As beings we can address one another. Done humbly, as a question, and with the fact in mind that humans are the most inexperienced of those beings, we can access this community directly, through our participation in it as embodied persons.

### **Embodied knowledge**

Indigenous thinking is situated as a process inside a universe of persons, and hence unfolds in relation to others. It refers to them and discovers their individual roles in narratives, which can manifest as oral stories or as pictorial or sculptural art. These narratives are cosmic and concrete at the same time. They are always linked to particular features of a geographic place. Because the universe is a society of persons, orienting in it always refers to this particular story in that particular place, in the same way as our personal experiences always refer to particular persons and places. In the animistic frame, abstract knowledge does not make sense, as it is out of touch with the actual world as a shared place. Instead of applying abstract rules, humans who follow an animistic mindset connect with the local actors (again, human and non-human) and let a story of mutual exchange unfold. Ecological practices, in this perspective, can never be the unfettered application of general rules, but must always be local, reciprocal, felt, and experiential.

### **Unified actions and embodied aliveness**

From these points it becomes clear that the western approach to separate reality into theory/ practice (or knowledge/ skills), and particularly the western tendency to remove subjective experience from both empirical knowledge and practical actions is not applicable to indigenous world-making. From this vantage point, we should learn to refrain from mere theoretical, academic assessments of practical

reality without at the same time enacting this reality. One of the strongest benefits and correcting forces provided by indigenous worldmaking is that it truly requires living through theoretical ideas, to enact getting-in-connection, to honestly ask the others.

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### **Being whole as our natural state**

The social, economic, ritualistic, and cosmological practices described above are not only formal. They are always experiences. And experiences are not neutral, they are emotional, and as such they produce existential values. Indigenous practices are intended to make all participants feel whole. Indeed, as various surveys show, members of indigenous societies on average show a remarkable satisfaction with their lives. The state of estrangement from the world and the ensuing existential angst, which is so predominant in western societies are relatively unknown in animistic societies. To be allowed to be alive in ecological balance makes humans feel whole – although it requires some tough cuts on individual freedom of self-realisation and choice (due to cultural practices to restrict egocentric behaviour). Meaningful behaviour intends increase. Because increase is no abstract category (as “growth” in western thinking), but a relational term, this increase is also a subjective experience.

### **Organisms are subjects and kin**

In biology, evidence that other beings must be empirically understood as persons has massively accumulated in recent years. From bees suffering from depression or enjoying euphoria to fruit flies undergoing chronic pain after an injury, organisms, which for a long time in the west have been viewed as mere machines, are witnessed as exhibiting subjectivity and feeling. The current revolution of “plant communications” shows that even herbs, trees, and mushrooms are capable of communication, choice and mutual aid. They all

exhibit the qualities connected with a self. Biological understanding rebuilds around notions of subjectivity as primary feature of life (Damasio 1999, Deacon 2011, Weber 2016, 2019). A newly emerging framework to understand those relationships in other beings in a living world is to experience them and to treat them as our kin. “Kinship” is becoming a focus to reconceive our interactions with one another and with the living world as relational, and centred around a common interest, which is the flourishing of the life supporting kin and through this, us (Van Horn 2019, Weber in Van Horn, Kimmerer & Hausdoerffer, forthcoming).

### “Forests Think”

In anthropology, some of the “new anthropologists” do not only take the worldviews of indigenous peoples seriously, but also explicitly invite our society to learn from those worldviews (Kohn 2013, Descola 2013, de Castro 2016). In this, some anthropologists openly take a panpsychist position (Danowski & de Castro 2015). This form of scientific anthropology takes a huge step away from the technical methodology of “just observing” other peoples, and openly embraces that meeting other cultures (human and non-human) means to be transformed by them (Wagner 2016).

### Invoking wholeness

It is important to stress that engaging in indigenous practices is not a purely theoretic endeavour and is not doable by a theoretical approach alone. The Anthropocene implies an animistic worldview. In order to engage with the world in an indigenous way we have to feel the world, to love it, to call it, to gather at the bank of a river, at a fire. We have to sing and dance, to embrace one another, to be ecstatic, and to listen. Indigenous practices have to be enacted and embodied. The spirits of rivers and mountains, which are entangled with our own lives, have to be invoked and asked for their participation. The overview intended by this essay therefore needs to



be complemented by practice, which enacts the theoretical findings – and through this corrects them, contradicts them, and maybe ultimately makes them redundant.

## 4

# Unbraining: Towards a Self-Decolonisation of the West

*"It is remarkable how Darwin recognises among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions', and the Malthusian 'struggle for existence'. It is Hobbes' 'bellum omnium contra omnes'... in Darwin the animal kingdom figures as civil society."*

**Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels**

This essay is the attempt to rediscover an animistic cosmology for all – as an escape strategy for what de Sousa Santos (2018) has called the “Western Cognitive Empire”. This rediscovery, however, is not intended to lead to a takeover, as western discoveries are often prone to. I do not advocate the integration of animism into the discursive realm of philosophical thought. We do not only need understanding, but also attitude. If the problem consisted only of finding the adequate rational paradigm for the ecological crisis, society would long have uncovered it. But what is at stake lies beyond the western approach of sorting out the “objects” to talk about, and do that in a rational way. It is not to do with talking in the first place, but with providing kindness in a collective of mutual interdependence. Kindness desired, kindness provided, that is the first requirement.

To turn away from “understanding” to “attitude” is not an idiosyncratic quirk, but an important principle. If we rightly understand aliveness and what it entails, this understanding always requires an attitude. And the right attitude starts with the way oneself behaves. So in order to discover the ecological genius inherent in animistic cosmologies, we cannot pick

their methods and incorporate them into the Eurocentric sustainability toolbox. This is deadening for the cultures the insights are taken from, but also for our own culture. So what for the west at first sight looks as a promising new theoretical turn reveals itself as the necessity to start from square one. The west – anyone inside western culture – needs to attempt a process of self-decolonisation.

To this day, progress in ecological matters, but also in developmental policy, was supposed to follow the same presupposition: It was supposed to happen through more emancipation (individual and societal liberties in the case of humans, the rights of species to be protected in the case of “nature”). In both cases, the subject needing protection was deemed to be pulled “upwards” to the status of the western emancipated (male, white) citizen. The move to attain this status is understood as “development”.

Development, however, often leads to deeper segregation. In the case of nature protection, development is connected with the creation of preserves and off-limit-zones. In non-western societies, this often leads to the separation of traditional landowners from the land, which provides their physical and spiritual identity. In the west, this process is connected to a deepened alienation from nature as “fragile”, better not to be touched, and in opposition to human culture. Though particular species might be protected through this approach, the outcome reinforces the antagonism between humans and other beings. In traditional societies, it creates a hostile situation towards traditional landownership. The classical emancipatory approach of the west tries to protect objects of nature through separation and purification. But if there is no true separation between the members of the society of being, this approach must ultimately destroy what it means to save.

## We need something else

The aim of this essay is to turn this process around: Instead of “helping” non-western others (human and non-human) to emancipate, to rise to the height of the subject immanent in the western cognitive empire, and consequently to achieve personal self-realisation, mainly through the acquisition of commodities (objects), we must turn our gaze around. It is the western rational subject who is in need of help. It needs to emancipate from a rational-only actor locked into an objectifying discourse. The western rational subject needs to transform from a cognitive agent to an embodied individual, interwoven with the web of life, and – physically as well as emotionally – dependent on the exchange with other living beings. It needs to emancipate from a thinking actor to a feeling participant. This includes the change from a separate entity to somebody who is part of the collective.

Instead of teaching others (non-western individuals and collectives, human and otherwise) how to act rationally and efficiently, westerners need to learn how to behave as individuals within the larger context of the collective of life. The possibility to protect life here is not derived from an enlargement of conceptual models about the world, but from granting ourselves the aliveness – and the ensuing requirements to allow others their own aliveness – which the western cognitive empire denies as a valuable understanding and practice to interact with life.

We can call this stance the primacy of self-decolonisation. It must come before offering colonial “help” to peoples suffering from the effects of colonialism. It is necessary to first allow ourselves our own aliveness and all its expressions and feeling experiences before we start planning how we should protect life. So we are dealing with an emancipation requirement here, but it is not the emancipation to the western status of fully mature or autonomous subject. It is rather the emancipation away from it – but not back into the state of

dependent serf (or oppressed woman), but forward to mature individuality as expression of the fact that all life is given from others, and all existence is shared.

I have called this move “Enlivenment” (Weber 2013, 2019), in an attempt to stress the necessity to overcome the heritage of enlightenment thinking and to proceed towards the participation in life. The spirit of the enlightenment – and the push to goals of individual emancipation – has been, and still is, the underlying framework for the western cognitivist model. Enlivenment, in contrast to that, emphasises a second emancipatory move that was missing in the original enlightenment and its focus on the “rational actor” working for his individual expansion in a world full of objects. Enlivenment calls for the emancipation from the confinement in rational concepts, as those rational concepts ipso facto take reality as composed of mere things, or, more extreme still, as pure imagination happening through signs in the sphere of culture.

With the arrival of the Anthropocene, the scene has become fluid. The enlightenment-style confrontation between the (linguistic) rational-actor model and a position that experiences the world as inherently meaningful and meaning-generating has somewhat abated. It has given way to the “material turn”, which posits that, in philosopher Karen Barad’s (2003) words, also “matter matters”, that, in Jane Bennett’s (2010) terms, matter has agency, too, that we are part of, in Timothy Morton’s (2017) words, the “Symbiotic Real”, and that, finally, in Bruno Latour’s (2018) view, we need to acknowledge Gaia as a political actor.

All this lends us a lifeline in order to deconstruct the western cognitive empire. On the other hand, all those positions developed in terms of innovations and minor revisions of western discursive thinking often still follow the predominant norm of talking about structures of reality instead of participating in them in a mutual and fecund way. So the bulk of

the emancipation work has still to be done. And it has to be done in a much more deeply self-critical way than is available through current “Anthropocene critical theory”. It has to be done through practical identification with and attending to the needs of the collective of life.

We should do more than talk about the entanglement of culture and the earth system in terms of the Anthropocene, which still keeps a detached eye, which still does not proceed to embed this talk in embodied acts of reconciliation, of direct communication with non-humans, and with putting feeling back into the centre. We should do more than discuss concepts, unless we want to perpetuate colonialism.

### **Narcissism as symptom of being colonised**

So the change required extends further than to epistemological grounds alone. This is why the west needs help – in the sense of life-saving help, not of compliant assistance – of non-western cosmologies. The change required needs to be a profound shift away from the objectifying perspective to a practice of engagement as shared knowledge. We have to stop seeing the world, and the way to behave in and with it, as a problem of observation and adequate description. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the Brazilian anthropologist who has done a lot to allow animistic cosmologies to enter the stage in terms of equals, observes that the “massive conversion of ontological questions into epistemological ones is the hallmark of modernist philosophy” (Viveiros de Castro in Bird-Davis 1999: S79). We have to invite ontology back in, but not only in terms of scientific inquiry. We need to admit that it is important how we treat others in the collective. We need to actually treat them differently. We have to start to adhere to a world, not only theoretically debate it.

In the still dominating “episteme”, the organisation of knowledge of reality, caring about how the world is is repressed.

The relevant scientific debate is centred around how people think the world is. In the cognitive empire, still everyone – and every culture – who insists on trying to get in touch with how the world is, is excluded. This exclusion rejects non-human beings from the get-go. And it disqualifies what we share with non-human beings. The western cognitive rules forbid seeing the subjective inner lives of non-human beings, as these lives cannot be measured or proven. This perspective ipso facto cuts the traces that connect us to the remainder of being, and this to us. In order to counter this attitude we need to take serious an ontology which is shared by non-humans. In order to emphasise the relevance of this sort of ontological realism, Edoardo Kohn (2013) explains that he has explicitly called his book on Amazonian animistic cosmological practices “How Forests Think”, and not “How People Think about Forests”.

Barriers are the hallmarks of colonialism. They exclude those not adhering to the club for reasons of assumed inferiority (in this case, intellectual), denying them their personal, embodied, feeling experience of how the world is. The epistemological empire negates participation in the world in the same way an apartheid regime denies access to institutional rights. An individual's ontological experience includes her lived reality and the whole of possible relations to other actors. It touches a profound, vital level of existence. Denying the validity of these experiences denies existence. It is, as any denial of an individual's own being, deeply traumatising.

This trauma is the core defect of western metaphysics. The attitude of the west is not only a worldview among others. It excludes all perspectives from further discourse, which deviate from its standards. For this reason alone the ontological hegemony of the western paradigm necessarily needs to be dissolved. De Sousa Santos (2018: 6, 38) observes: “There is no social justice without cognitive justice... modern epistemological arrogance is the other side of the arrogance of

modern colonial conquest.”

It is impossible to base the healing of life on a standard that in principle denies the ontological reality of life. Such an attitude will always reproduce the typical deadlock of colonialism and turn alleged saviours into destroyers. This is the main reason why mainstream sustainability has such limited success.

The colonising effect of the western cognitive empire does not only ruin the oppressed (non-humans/ humans), but damages also the oppressor. This dialectics has already been observed by post-colonial pioneer philosopher Franz Fanon (1961). Trauma is damaging, to the injured and to the injurer. What is oppressed is something which yearns for life in the oppressor as well. True decolonisation therefore is dependent on the effort of self-liberation of those who exercise violence. It needs to interrupt the trauma cycle, in which the oppressor, through his/ her own oppression, causes more violence. Fanon (1961) has shown that “to fight against” an oppressor might easily turn you into a coloniser, too.

A whole body of post-colonial literature and post-feminist writing grapples with the fact that those who fight the Eurocentric white male paradigm often repeat it unconsciously and thus perpetuate it (Salami 2020). The post-colony – the post-emancipatory state – can even be defined as the pathology of unconsciously mirroring the colonial perpetrators, of re-enacting the cruelties of those who oppress living participation.

By this perspective, decolonisation becomes not only an ontological project and a political struggle, but also a psychological healing journey. The narcissist who hurts others will not be stopped by these others acquiring narcissistic treats and fighting back. The end of violence is in sight only if she looks at what she has been missing, what unfulfilled needs



make her act out. She has to feel who she really is. This is where self-decolonisation starts.

Anthropologist Viveiros de Castro (2017: pos604) observes: “Western metaphysics is truly the fons et origo of every colonialism.” In a world in which only epistemological excellence counts, humans are denied their humanness – their feeling of being alive, their confidence in their own perceptions and sensations, their competence to communicate with a vast range of other beings, their compliance to work for a common good, their readiness to share, their capability to create beauty by nourishing the family of being. Western metaphysics is narcissistic to the degree in which it does not accept other forms of knowledge and bases this decision on an absolute, structural preference for its own position. You cannot reason with a narcissist.

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Castro originally pondered to name the book, which now goes by the title “Cannibal Metaphysics”, “Anti-Narciss”. Castro had in mind to relate, via this word game, to the title of Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s book “Anti-Oedipus” from 1972. In Anti-Oedipus the two authors famously claimed that capitalism – the epitome of splitting the world into (non-human) objects and a (human) culture re-arranging those objects – is a manifestation (and legitimation) of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia at its very root means splitting.

For Castro the dualistic division of the world by western metaphysics is a pathology that causes corresponding symptoms. These symptoms then mask the pathology: They make it immune against deeper enquiry (which would be “unscientific”). The trauma of western epistemology works in the same way in which developmental trauma causes a disturbed personality to powerfully block the path to potential healing. Technically, “splitting” in a personality disorder like narcissism is (unconsciously) used by the narcissist in order to project his own feelings of insufficiency onto others who are

held to be inferior. It is applied to mask the problem.

## **Capitalism as colonisation**

There is a close relationship between a dualistic approach to the world as an assortment of objects, and the idea that the adequate treatment of these objects (including everyone and everything not adhering to the societal contract) is to exploit them as commodities. As I have argued in “Enlivenment” (2013, 2019), treating everything outside the contractual society as material good only denies its own life and the role it plays in ours, denying also our own aliveness. This attitude changes reality into a dead zone. It introduces turns our understanding of the world into a “metaphysics of death” – as anything important has only to do with the re-arrangement of material building blocks devoid of personal relation. We – material beings – stick to the waist in this dead zone; we are crazily afraid to drown further (and to die), and hence we wage a constant war and deliberately drag others under (“better them than us”).

The liberal economy, with its antagonism between resources (which are traded) and subjects (who trade or need to be supplied with things), is one of the many manifestations of this dualism. Dualism entails a capitalistic economy, because dualism is the concept of reducing persons to things, and capitalism enacts just that. If we separate ourselves from the remainder of the world, all things become means, and we become means, too. If we sort the world in two boxes, inside and outside, the damage is already done. Positing a subject here and an object there inevitably leads to the destruction of both. Subject and resource, agents and goods – that is the working formula of capitalism. Things there, actors here, this is also the ideology of war.

The western episteme is waging a war against every (human and non-human) person not included in the club. From this

perspective, there is no difference between enclosure, commodification, colonisation and warfare. All of those not only attack living systems, they also damage psychological and emotional identities connected to life and life's dependency on other lives. They are all attacks on "aliveness" itself – a capacity of life that is unavailable and incomprehensible to the dualistic mind. They are attacks on reality. For the Italian philosopher Ugo Mattei (quoted in Bollier 2014), the opposition of subject and object already is a commodification. In this vein, political scientist David Johns (2014:42) observes, "Colonialism is nowhere more apparent and thriving than in the relationship between humanity and the rest of the earth."

If we are colonising life, it follows that we also colonise – and oppress – ourselves, because life is part of us. Western metaphysics rejects the healthy capacities of embodied human beings to live productive lives in mutuality with a world rife with creation. This denial is explicit regarding a large number of humans, where we call it colonial thinking. And it is implicit with respect to nearly all other living beings, where this refusal is upheld by mainstream science. Through the western cognitive mindset, we deny all embodied beings their healthy capacities – including ourselves. The proponents of the cognitive schism, which is the hallmark of the empire, are deemed to be slaveholders, but they are also slaves.

Paradoxically, the critical reflection of the western paradigm I put forth in this essay must itself fall through the epistemological sieve the western paradigm has constructed – as it draws on experiences not within the framework of science. The Western model is inert to critique from within – and it is immune to attack from the outside. Just so is capitalism. It is high time that we move outside our human shell and call the others for rescue. As philosopher Val Plumwood (2013:441) asserts, "We need a thorough and open rethink, which has the courage to question our most basic cultural narratives."

This rethink is a double-sided move: It means to investigate cosmologies, which westerners have forsaken long ago – and it means to put confidence in the fact that the capacity to participate in those cosmologies is part of our own being. We should explore these capacities. We should grant space for what anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) called the “savage mind”, our own ability to adhere to the “compact of being”, as poet and ecophilosopher Gary Snyder (1990) says, the rules and ecstasies of the ecological mutuality of life.

The savage mind is the antidote to what post-colonial thinker Achille Mbembe (2016) names the “abstract universalism” of the cognitivist mindset. The savage mind does not entail wildness in the sense of the western, Hobbesian cliché, but a reliance on one’s own existence as productive participation in an ongoing creative process bringing forth diversity and meaning, and providing life in an unlimited way, if it is taken care of. The savage mind understands how to participate in a live-giving cosmos. The savage mind is what sleeps inside of each of us, when we stop in our tracks, startled by the beauty of a rose, by the movements of the leaves in a breeze.

The savage mind is our way to no longer adhere to what is expected from us by the cognitive enclosures of the west. Wild is not devoid of rules, to the contrary. The rules it grows from, however, are not those of usurpation, but of reciprocity. “Wild” has been denigrated as “red in tooth and claw” or touted as “unlimited personal freedom”, but it is none of this. Wild is the capacity to follow the rules in order to be alive and to experience this aliveness as it is, from the inside and from the outside.

It is important to retain that we have a sensory capacity for what these rules to produce life are. In ecological terms, self-decolonisation means to allow our whole embodied self to have a say. It means to admit that feeling, intuition, and the experience of connection are integral ecological

capacities which we share with all beings. Self-decolonisation means to allow ourselves our own feelings. We can trust them when we keep in mind that feelings are a living being's ways of keeping track with the community of others, how she is faring in it, and how they are (Weber 2017).

## 5

### The Rules of Aliveness

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*"The earth has power and culture within it."*

**Deborah Bird Rose**

The argument of this essay follows a paradigm shift pushing the focus of our experiences away from the dualistic mainstream, which determined the last 400 years of western understanding. These new patterns of enquiry go by the names of "New Materialism" or "Non-Human-Turn". Although those new academic perspectives share many findings with animistic cosmologies, and their proponents sometimes openly express their sympathies towards them (Danowski & Castro 2017), yet for westerners, true animism frequently remains dubious – something with the stigma of "primitive", "weird", "irrational" or "uncivilised".

This is a profound problem, because it creates a block to a possible kinship, which could serve all. It is related to a deep-seated bias in westerners to subconsciously privilege forms of knowledge and practical rituals, which keep the world – the co-creating aliveness of all human and non-human persons – at a distance by observing them as objects.

The thrust of this essay is that in order to rescue sustainability practices from having only minor beneficial consequences, or, even worse, transposing the mistakes that have caused damage to another level, engagement in terms of sustainability needs to embrace an animistic attitude. But what does this mean? Believing in tree spirits and witchcraft? If we want to avoid the cultural traps western civilisation has erected between its routines and the remainder of life, it is crucial to

know what we are talking about when we say “animism”.

No indigenous community describes itself as “animist” – at least outside the need to adopt a western vocabulary. Referring to themselves, people use much more concrete identifiers, which can obscure an adequate conceptualisation in terms of western philosophy. People, for instance, speak of the “collective” (Luz Hualpa Garcia 2019, personal communication). With this, they refer to all beings that are part of the “society of being” including non-organic entities that normally would not be accounted for as “living”, like rivers and mountains.

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If required to refer to the character of their cosmology, indigenous people prefer to talk in terms of “the law” – the powerful life-giving principles of the cosmos that are totally non-exclusive and apply to all, and do not form a hierarchical topography as in western discourse, with (white) man on top, as he allegedly has the highest capacities of understanding, communication, and connection. It is important to see that only a truly animistic way of assuming that we share aliveness, need, and individuality with all, enables us to communicate with others from a non-condescending vantage point.

When, in holistic western science, authors talk about nature as displaying mind (as e.g. Bateson 1972), they do this in a highly metaphorical way. They often silently refer to the Christian-platonic concept as the “one mind” out of which the visible world emerged as manifestation of its transcendent nature. Viewed from that angle, visible life becomes the downgraded concretion of a higher, mental level, and only insofar displays mind at it is the expression of this higher level. This occidental-Christian view which erects a “natural order” in which it always puts the mental aspect higher, and the incarnated, embodied, material dimension lower. Even in some romantic conceptions like Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism, nature (Emerson 2003), the immanent, is

a symbol of the transcendent domain.

Animistic thought is different. It encounters other minds all the time, and it meets them through the body. It does not need a “theory of mind” in order to recognise and address them. It needs to have an experience of aliveness in order to know that this experience cannot be but shared. Rationality from an animistic perspective is not the logic of the world’s building plan (which allegedly can be grasped only by the rational western mind), but is established through distributed acts of self-care of an endless number of beings, who need to manage to live together.

From this juxtaposition of western and indigenous attitudes towards reality, it becomes understandable why anthropologists got animism wrong for a very long time. They basically found what they expected – folks standing on a lower rung of the cultural ladder and projecting their ignorance and fears onto the world, assuming benevolent or malevolent demons in everything. The term animism was coined in order to yield a more systematic term for superstition. The influential Victorian ethnologist Edward Tylor believed that the indigenous human “endow[s] all things, even inanimate ones, with a nature analogous to his own” (quoted after Bird-Davis 1999:S69). This nature, however, Tylor could only imagine as the dualistic western idea of a spirit (mind) in a body (machine). For the Victorian anthropologist, the animistic world must have seemed a cosmos beset with demons.

While Tylor blamed “the primitives” to project their personal experience on the non-human world, in truth he was himself projecting his idea of a person (as a mind entrapped in an object, a body) on the experiences, which indigenous people are making. As Val Plumwood observes: “Our concepts of rationality have misunderstood and misrepresented indigenous animism in our own dualistic terms. Colonial ethnocentrism saw ‘animism’ as holding that humanoid (often demonic)



spirits inhabit and inanimate material objects as separate drivers, which could be welcomed, influenced or evicted. This ploy enabled them to read our own dualisms back into other cultures, and thus to present this major alternative to reductionism as primitive and anti-rational” (Plumwood in Harvey 2013:449).

Plumwood’s colleague Nurit Bird-Davis (1999) identifies in animism two fundamental challenges to mainstream western thought. In animistic thinking, a person is not split up into mind versus body, and the earth is not segregated into humans and environment. To the great astonishment of anthropologists, indigenous people do not discriminate between “nature” and “culture” (Descola 2013). Instead, they consider themselves part of the great society of life. Reality is social – but “social” does not stand as a contrast to “embodied”. Social means that being happens through relationships. From the animistic point of view, society is not restricted to humans. It includes all on an equal footing.

The “ego”, each own’s individuality, can only unfold through honouring this profound primacy of relationship. We all are cut from the same cloth. Life builds on a primordial relatedness. Viewed through an animistic lens, we are all part of the family of life. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1988) asserts that “the irreducibility of the individual is a peculiarly modernist notion” (Bird-Davis 1999: S72). Accordingly, animistic cosmologies always consider the individual a necessary part of the collective. For Strathern, therefore, it would be more adequate to call the animist conception of an agent a “dividual”.

### **Animism is practical holistic science**

Cultures, which practice animism, have nothing to do with superstition and childish fear, nor with naiveté or wrong but useful perceptual proxies. They are not naive, or primitive.

Instead, they have been adopting a range of profoundly realistic perspectives and practices, which only very recently started to gain ground in western mainstream science.

What are the most important principles of animistic cosmologies? There are probably two major attributes, which are interrelated:

1. All beings are considered persons who possess the whole spectrum of qualities we ascribe to a person, namely a body, a will, desires, feelings, rational thinking, perception and a voice to make herself heard.
2. All those persons come about only through relationships by which the world is shared between all participants.

So we have a very strong, idiosyncratic individuality, which is widely distributed and completely barrier-free (all communicate, can be heard and addressed), and we have at the same time a prevalence of the collective over this very individuality, as the individual really is a “dividual” (Strathern) co-created by the collective of life. All beings are subjects, which have access to one another’s perspective precisely through the fact that all know what it is like to be a subject. And all need to share the reciprocal perspectives, as life is a cooperative process. Therefore, all subjectivity is intersubjectivity.

Put together in a handy table (Table 2) we can compare those basic traits of how life is distributed in animistic cosmologies to the attitude of the west.

The table depicts mainstream science. Yet some newer positions of western science, e. g. quantum physics, biosemiotics, some flavours of cultural science and critique, do not map on the classical paradigm of the cognitive empire anymore.

Table 2  
Aliveness in the Western and in the Animistic Cosmos

Western Cognitive Empire	Animistic Cosmos
All elements of life are objects.	All participants of life are persons.
An object consists of smaller objects; it is static and self-identical.	A person consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.
The building blocks which make an object are unrelated single entities.	The process of relating which creates persons at the same time establishes community.
Objects do not communicate; any perceived communication is a projection of the human observer.	Persons communicate about their needs and desires, this communication is the relational process which creates more persons and provides fecundity for the place.
Objects have no inner life.	All persons have feelings, desires, needs.
Objects must be addressed by physical manipulation.	Persons need to be addressed in a way that takes into account their desire to satisfy their needs.
The world is silent. Connection and communication are impossible. We are cut off from life.	If a person communicates well she is provided her place in the collective of life forever.
We must build culture in order to give ourselves life in a dead world, culture protects us against the meaninglessness of the cosmos.	We must build culture as continuation of a live-giving cosmos, culture connects us with the meaningfulness of the cosmos.

Those are still exceptions to the mainstream, however. If we have a deeper look at those transdualistic scientific paradigms, an astonishing picture emerges, in which many newer intellectual patterns are tacitly adopting animistic positions. Those, for example, claim that:

- ≈ Each individual is the product of a shared activity as found in linguistic and poststructural linguistic (Derrida) and social discourse (Foucault). Individuality is distributed and must be viewed as a rhizome (Deleuze)
- ≈ Relationship is the underlying nature of reality as found in physics, (Bohr, Schrödinger, Heisenberg)
- ≈ All living beings strive and desire, all are feeling subjects as shown in biosemiotics (Uexküll, Hoffmeyer, Weber)
- ≈ There are no distinct domains of culture and nature as established in the Anthropocene discourse (Latour, Descola)
- ≈ Reality is a co-creation, or, “reciprocal specification” as found in cognitive science and psychology (Watzlawick, Varela, Thompson, Clarke)
- ≈ Matter is agential as argued in “New Materialism” (Bennett, Barad, Morton)
- ≈ The biosphere (Gaia) is a living organism as found by systems science (Lovelock, Margulis)
- ≈ The biosphere (Gaia) is an actor needing political representation as put forth in sociology (Latour, Stengers)

If we look closely, we can read Bruno Latour's (1993) suggestion that "we have never been modern" as an early appeal to the animistic ground where every life experience is anchored in, and where matter is intimately connected to meaning and relation. According to Latour, western science attempts to purify the world and sort everything neatly into the according spheres (objects into the box with the label "things", meaning into the crate named "culture"). This effort, however, does not succeed but creates hybrid entities ("monsters", which are neither dead nor alive, and which span various meanings and bodies at once (like "the climate", which is a technical term and at the same time something that behaves as if it has agency). Timothy Morton (2013) calls some of those monsters "hyperobjects", or "spectres".

Latour (1993) suggested that instead of trying to segregate facts from meanings and sort both into allegedly separated domains, we should embrace the finding that every body has agency full-front. We should proceed by opening a "parliament of things" in order to negotiate the terms between these hybrid entities – and us as one among them. This brings Latour very close to an animistic conception of interacting with others. Think of an aboriginal elders' council, which represents the voices of the local totemic group. If the elders decide that they need to reduce the hunt of a local totem animal (say, an emu) in order to protect the species, we can describe this as a way of standing in for the will of a non-human being through a human social representation. It seems that animists have established a parliament of "things" already for a very long time.

### **Science as communication between persons**

There is, however, one huge difference between the animism-friendly western avantgarde thinking I have described above and indigenous cultures: The western critique of dualism is mostly treated as "scientific finding" in the typical

western stance. A scientific finding is theoretical and not ontological. It does not have any guidance for life. In this respect, even avantgarde science still respects the alleged ideal of objectivity. By this attitude, however, the avant-gardes become self-contradictory, and therefore toxic. They “preach wine and drink water”.

More is needed. We are required to take serious that while we are breathing in this world we are in intimate contact with an infinity of other, mostly non-human, persons. We cannot exclude those contacts while we do science. We cannot shed them as long as we want to be alive. We are always personally invested, we are always in a meshwork of relationships in which we need to behave well in order to not wreak havoc – for us or the others.

Graham Harvey, religious scholar and author of a standard textbook (2017) and a reference-level edited volume (2013) on animism, makes this very clear. Harvey (2017:xiii) says: “Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others... In reality, there are no individuals. There are only relatives and acts of relating... Persons are those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons may be spoken with. Objects, by contrast, are usually spoken about. Persons are volitional, relational, cultural and social beings...” Persons come first. The differentiation into specific kinds of persons – some of whom we would call species – comes later. And Harvey’s colleague, anthropologist Nurit Bird-Davis, observes: “The Ojibwa conceives of ‘person’ as an overarching category within which ‘human person,’ ‘animal person,’ ‘wind person,’ etc., are subcategories.” (Bird Davies 1999:S71).

This marks the true gulf distinguishing between westerners who admit plurality in a theoretical description of the world, and animists who cannot help living what they feel the world

is like. Harvey observes: “People become animists by learning how to recognise persons and, far more important, how to relate appropriately with them.” Animists “use words like relative and relation to replace some uses of person”. In Harvey’s (2017: xiv) “understanding these terms are synonymous”. A person is always related. A subject is always dependent on other subjects. A subject is always intersubjective. Subject means already to be “inter” – to be a relational process itself.

According to Harvey, the defining point of animism entails a radical change in our way to communicate with the world. It vastly enlarges the scope of our participation in it: “If every ‘thing’ we humans encounter might in fact be a living person the implications and ramifications are immense” (Harvey 2017:xx). And he goes on: In animism “intelligence, rationality, consciousness, volition, agency, intentionality, language and desire are not human characteristics that might be mistakenly projected onto ‘non-humans’, but are shared by humans with all other kinds of persons.” (Harvey 2017:xxiv).

### **Biosemiotics: Towards an animated biology**

The western complacency not only belittles non-western humans, but the whole non-human remainder of being. Western thinking attributes the “state of nature” (Hobbes) to non-human beings and to the supposedly primitive humans living in close connection with these beings, allegedly too ignorant to understand that humans are forever separated from other organisms. Not only has the understanding of the “savage mind” been flawed, the idea of animal and plant mind (or rather the alleged lack thereof) has been flawed too. But finally today, the mainstream conviction that the overwhelming majority of non-human species is not capable of inner experiences can be revised.

For a long time, biology has worked under the assumption that in order to explain the functions of life, those must be

“reduced” to chemical and physical processes. This approach has led to the breathtaking success of biological sciences, particularly to the discovery of genetic information, the ability to extract it, decode it and at least partially tailor it. Ecology has analysed the structure of natural systems through the idea of distribution of resources by competition. This view does not leave space for the “inner life” of organisms. Ecology, as does evolutionary theory, paints a picture of organisms as inanimate biomachines in incessant competition.

Mainstream biological sciences are explicitly anti-animistic: For them, there is no “anima” in nature. Biology has been a stronghold of the conviction that treating life as animated is a baseless fantasy. It could not even be thought of asking for the animatedness of whole ecosystems, like mountains and rivers are. Ecologists speak of systems, disturbances and balances, and they do so in order to understand flows of particles, objects, and information. They usually do not consider that describing an ecosystem is already a way of taking part in it – and that taking part in it is always done through the subjective perspective of existential concern, hence in the first person.

In order to protect natural ecosystems, applied ecology strives to maintain resilience of habitats and natural landscapes. It cannot, however, say anything about why humans should care about keeping as many species as possible in their company – apart from the human-centred idea that biodiversity maintains biospherical resilience, and that this is good for man. Ecological science has been treating other beings just as much as objects as economical science has. In both cases, they are resources for the human world – in one case as parts of the biotic “life support system”, in the other as goods and commodities. (For a discussion of the idea that ecology and economy are parts of the same “bioliberal” science of distribution of objects, see Weber 2013, 2019).



In recent years, this view has been challenged from within biology. Change comes from two fronts: From behavioural science and neuroethology, where moods and subjective states of other animals, but lately also of plants, are researched, and from cognitive science, particularly from the research field of “biosemiotics” (Uexküll 1980, Hoffmeyer 1996, Emmeche & Kull 2011). Findings in both fields have led to a veritable revolution in biological thinking (which is still fully under way). I will, for the sake of the argument, only shortly touch on the main findings here, which are the subjects of several works of mine (Weber 2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2019).

Animals, and even plants, so the hardening evidence, have subjective experiences. Those experiences exist throughout different species and are not confined to the small group of (mostly mammalian) organisms closely related to humans, as biology was ready to admit before. To give just a couple of examples: We know now that not only apes and dolphins, but also cats, dogs, crows and even pilot fishes and octopuses can recognise their own self (e.g. in a mirror or through sniffing).

These findings mean that we potentially have to admit that the experience of self extends to non-mammalian species and even invertebrates. It is improbable that only one mollusc species, octopus, has developed self-consciousness, and all others, e. g. garden snails, have not. We already know that bees can feel euphoria and suffer from depression, and we know that fruitflies experience chronic pain throughout their lives after they have been injured. (Do not ask me how researchers tested this). We know by now that plants perceive and communicate, cooperate and have social lives, just as animals, only in a different, sedentary fashion, plant style.

These findings are accounted for by biological theories that seek to understand organisms as subjects. In

biosemiotics, cells are no longer viewed as plain, albeit complicated, things, as biomachines, which react according to programmed information and physical laws. Rather, the phenomenon of life on a very basic level, which is the maintenance of a cell, is understood as the creation of an embodied self with an according inner perspective.

Cells – and all organisms – are, according to this new research field of embodied semiotic biology, subjects with interest in their own existence, and with curiosity towards others with whom this existence is shared. There is a “meaning dimension”, an “imaginary dimension” and an “intrinsic teleology” (Varela 1997, Weber & Varela 2003) to all life, even to the most basic forms of it. The inner experience of being alive for all organisms is similar to ours in principle. It may be different in degree, but it is not different in kind.

In my essay “Enlivenment” (2013, 2019), I have summarised the most striking features of this view on organisms as follows: “For the emerging new biological paradigm aliveness is a notion and an experience, which governs the perceptions of biological agents... In the emerging new picture, organisms are no longer viewed as genetic machines, but basically as materially embodied processes that bring forth themselves (Weber & Varela 2003, Weber 2010). They are matter, organisation, but also meaning, existential experience, and poetic expression. Each single cell is a ‘process of creation of an identity’ (Varela 1997). Already the simplest organism must be understood as being a material system displaying the desire to keep itself intact, to grow, to unfold, and to produce a full-scope of life for itself. A cell is a process that produces the components necessary to allow for these developments— while the materials of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, silicon flow through it.”

Let me sum up the traits of this new framework in a synoptic way in order to conceptualise the principles that guide a

living being (Weber 2019:81):

- ≈ It acts according to its own autonomy and therefore is not completely determined by external factors. It creates its identity by transforming foreign matter into the stuff of self.
- ≈ It produces itself and thereby manifests the desire to grow and avoid disturbances, and actively searches for positive inputs such as food, shelter, and partners.
- ≈ It shows behaviour that is constantly evaluating influences from the external and its own, internal world.
- ≈ It follows goals.
- ≈ It acts out of concern and from the experience of meaning.
- ≈ It is a subject with an intentional point of view. We can call this way of meaning-guided world-making 'feeling'.
- ≈ It shows or expresses the conditions under which its life process takes place. A living being transparently exhibits its conditions. We can relate to its inwardness through the sensual expression of it (Weber 2019:81).

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The biology, which is currently emerging, corroborates many points of animism in a breathtaking way. This is summarised in the following chart (Table 3), which contrasts the new findings of biological science with the traditional scientific biological paradigm and compares them to the principles on which animism is based. The chart builds on table 2 above.

Table 3  
 Perspectives on Life in Western Science, Biosemiotics and Animism

Mainstream Science	Biosemitotics	Animism
All elements of life are objects.	All participants of life are subjects.	All participants of life are persons.
An object consists of smaller objects; it is static and self-identical.	A subject consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.	A person consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.
The building blocks which make an object are unrelated single entities.	The process of relating which creates subjects at the same time establishes the ecosystem.	The process of relating which creates persons at the same time establishes community.
Objects do not communicate; any perceived communication is a projection of the human observer.	Subjects act according to their needs and desires, these actions are the ecological exchange processes (assimilation, feeding, decomposition) which create more subjects and provide fecundity for the system.	Persons communicate about their needs and desires, this communication is the relational process which creates more persons and provides fecundity for the place.
Objects have no inner life.	All subjects have feelings, desires, needs.	All persons have feelings, desires, needs.
Objects must be addressed by physical manipulation.	Subjects need to be addressed through a first-person-scientific approach.	Persons need to be addressed in a way that takes into account their desire to satisfy their needs.
The world is silent. Connection and communication are impossible. We are cut off from life.	The world is profuse with meaning, we can understand non-human beings through our embodied imagination.	If a person communicates well she is provided her place in the collective of life forever.
We must build culture in order to give ourselves life in a dead world, culture protects us against the meaninglessness of the cosmos.	Culture is not different from biological worldmaking, both are participations in relationships through the creation and experience of meaning.	We must build culture as continuation of a live-giving cosmos, culture connects us with the meaningfulness of the cosmos.

The biological self is not a substance. Instead, it arises as a relational process based on necessary sharing and through this creates subjectivity. The self is a centre of action, which creates an experience of concern. It is dependent on the surrounding system that nurtures it, and at the same time struggles to maintain a status of precarious independence from this system. Already the smallest building blocks of living beings – cells – are not static objects, but form a process, an activity. This process is concerned with transforming what is outside of it (light, nutrients, benign or dangerous situations and actions from others) into a coherent identity. In order to bring forth a self – as body and as meaningful experience – it is necessary to relate and share.

Embodied selves come into being through other selves. They depend on cooperation and “interbeing”. A self can neither arise in isolation nor through the struggle of all against all. Rather, it is dependent on “other”—in the form of food, shelter, collaborators, partners. Self is always self-through-other. In this respect, the biosphere is paradoxically cooperative: Symbiotic relationships arise from antagonistic, incompatible processes: Matter/ form, genetic code/ soma, individual/ other. An individual comes into being because it negotiates several incompatible layers of worldmaking. A living system is a partially self-contradictory “meshwork of selfless selves” (Varela 1991).

We could even say with anthropologist Edoardo Kohn (2013) that any living system is a forest that thinks.

### **Nature is culture**

Recent biological research and theory support the animistic intuition that the world is peopled by persons with whom we share a fundamental level of embodied experience. The indigenous cosmology proves to be more accurate than the classical, dualistic biological view, and not less so. A similar

re-evaluation happened to physics when it adopted the multi-centered view of quantum mechanics a century ago. Today, we can observe an exciting shift away from ingrained dualism. Only one major domain of institutional knowledge barrages itself against the insight that individual flourishing is a function of the collective, and vice versa. That domain is economy.

Not only the avantgarde of western science overlaps with indigenous perspectives and practices to an astonishing degree. Animistic experiences permeate everyday life. In a very basic sense, we have never left the animistic universe of an ecology, which is massively shared. We continue to be embedded in mutuality: With those bodies whom we eat and with those who eat us after our lives end. We thrive on the breath of others that we inhale (the oxygen respired by the green plants) and others prosper because we feed them with our breath (the CO<sub>2</sub> taken up by the trees, flowers, and algae). All these are elements of an existential nexus. They are included in the experiences that we make on a daily basis. A walk in the forest allows us to experience the trees as the other persons whom we feed simply by breathing. A passing gaze at the sky lets us peek into the vast “commonwealth of breath” (Abram 2010), which we all share by being part of it. Harvey (2017:229) observes accordingly: “Even if the effort to be modern has involved trying to ignore human kinship with all other beings (and with constitutive matter), we remain involved participants in complex webs of predation, consumption and recycling.” These existential relations play out in our reality in symbolic form and become the basic elements of culture (Weber 2016). Culture is a way of expressively and creatively managing our existential needs and of keeping them in balance with the need of others, human and non-human.

As such, culture is not fundamentally different from the ways other, non-human beings, manage these needs. They have cultures, too, because they have needs, which reflect the

world from a meaningful perspective. They have cultures because they are persons. And these different cultures meet in the requirement to live in lasting ecological relationships together. Referring to this necessity, Gary Snyder speaks of the “etiquette” of the wild world, emphasising the mutuality through which ecological relations play out. The “etiquette” of the wild requires that no participant oversteps his or her space in the meshwork of exchange of matter and meaning. In their ways to manage existential needs all these different spaces are cultures, even though they may not be as prone to arbitrary “cultural” change as ours is.

So there are innumerable ways of forms and behaviour, which the westerner sees as “only nature” (the beaver building his dam, the lyrebird doing his dance, the smoke-like column, which bats form while flying out of their cave in dusk, the striped body pattern of a giant wasp building her nest under the roof of a tiny shelter in the bush). To the animistic mind, all these are communications about the respective cultures. Animists experience those “endless forms most beautiful” (Darwin) always as impressions of an inside, of a somebody, with whom one can relate precisely through these appearances. The appearances have a meaning for us humans, because they are meaningful for the animal person.

If you are about to jump up and shout “that’s so naïve”, wait a minute. All these semiotic characters are indeed signs of the specific life of the respective species, and they do tell a lot of how they live, what they need, how we can help them to thrive, and how they can help us to feed on them. The hunter knowledge of indigenous peoples is remarkable, and it is so, because they stand with other persons (which we call their prey) on an equal footing and can read their culture.

Viveiros de Castro (2016:250) concludes from the biosemiotic background that “culture is the nature of the subject”. Because all beings in reality are subjects, their life worlds

are always cultures. “Bodies are souls... as souls and spirits are bodies because both are bundles of affects and sites of perspective.” (Castro 1998:481; “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism”). And Deborah Bird Rose (2013:139), an Australian anthropologist, adds: “In country [the Australian term for the living landscape which has brought forth the collective of its inhabitants] there is no nature/ culture divide; one could say that it is all culture, but that misses the more fundamental point that country is primarily a system of pattern, connection, and action.” Culture is real, not as a human invention, but as a habit of reality. Culture inevitably governs the manifestation of bodies in relation.

This is where the great doyen of anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, went wrong. It was dear to him to save the long standing distinction between “nature” and “society”, which had characterized French anthropology and philosophy at least since the work of Emile Durkheim. While earlier anthropologists had sorted the “primitive” peoples to the nature side (“savages”), Lévi-Strauss “elevated” them to the culture side. They have cultures just as we have, he held, only that their cultures are obsessed with plants and animals.

Lévi-Strauss argued that other beings play a special role in animistic societies because on an early cultural stage “animals are good to think”. For Lévi-Strauss, indigenous people use nature as a proxy for society. Their penchant to “think animals” characterises their “savage mind”. It is a mind that uses non-human others as analogies to human affairs in order to organise the complexities of society. In truth, Lévi-Strauss holds, “thinking animals” is all about humans, and not about animals.

Through this, the French anthropologist saved the importance of nature for indigenous people from being devalued as “primitive”. But at a high price: Non-human beings lost all reality in their own right. They were just a



“proxy” – and therefore something even less valuable than the disordered and evil realm of nature, “red in tooth and claw”, as civilisation sees non-human others. Plants and animals changed into mere projections of the human mind. Lévi-Strauss’ proposal rests on the assumption that other beings are empty planes of projection, and have no subjectivity of their own. This theory had an influence that cannot be underestimated. It stood at the beginning of the strong emphasis in structuralism and poststructuralism to view “nature” as an illusion, and thus helped to damage real “nature” as something not worth our care.

The true “savage mind” smiles at this artful dead end. She understands that nature truly is a society, because it is peopled by (non-human) persons. Nature is “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss) because nature is already permeated with culture. Culture (the generation of subjective and shared meaning) is a fundamental biological process. Nature has culture, because non-human persons have desires that need to be negotiated in systematic and mutual ways.

Contrary to Lévi-Strauss, the cultural fixation on nature which indigenous people show does not mean that these peoples thrive because of their useful, but arbitrary habit of structuring their thought by the means of plants and animals, whereas westerners structure it through discursive reason. In indigenous cultures human society is not formed after the society of other beings, but with them. It is so because these non-human beings are our kin, and we need to respect their ways, allow them to prosper, and must not deviate from the principles of life, which are the principles of continuous creation and rejuvenation.

Permanent life as society must be ecological, which is just another way of saying that we need to nourish good relations. We can learn how to be ecological if we allow ourselves to be inspired by ecology, which is the art of

building relations in mutuality. Ecology embraces a society of life in which the needs of embodied subjects are distributed, negotiated, and eternally transformed into new life.

In order to appreciate this attitude we must not bypass the testimony of our living body. We have to be considerate of the bodies of other beings, but we also need to take our own seriously. It is important to see that both requirements go hand in hand: Allowing ourselves to see other beings as persons with needs helps us to accept that our own being is a person with needs too, not only abstract cognition. Consenting to the “soft animal of your body” (Oliver 1994) softens us. If we accept ourselves as feeling, yearning, knowing beings, we cannot stop from accepting others in this new experience.

### **Allowing the others to speak**

To most, this understanding becomes immediately clear when they walk into the outdoors in order to fulfill their emotional need to be in touch with other beings (and not only to observe and classify them). The others start to speak. The others start to gain a voice. They start to be meaningful, to assume unexpected presences, to move to tears. Those experiences can be facilitated by practices of nature mentoring which have become widespread in our western societies. But they are something, which comes to us naturally. If we decide to treat other beings as persons, we will have a completely different experience of them.

We need to retain this as a lesson for a different sustainability practice, based not only on theoretically grasping (and teaching) the principles of animism, but also engaging with the most profound of its principles, which encompass sharing the world with others on an equal footing. We all – humans and non-humans – are persons with needs, emotions, and a social intuition. We cannot forsake these capacities

in order to be “scientific”. As we are surrounded by persons who all expect from us that we behave in an adequate way, there can never be such neutrality. Rather, it is an insult, as it pretends that those others, who exist as persons like we are, are only things.

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Not only does observation grant access to reality, but also feeling and intuition. In his book “Animate Earth” ecologist Stephan Harding (2004) names four ways of coming into connection with the living cosmos: Through thinking, perceiving, feeling and intuition. The living cosmos informs us in a direct way, because we and all in it are sensitive bodies, which emotionally experience themselves as persons – concerned by the doings of others acting on others.

From the vantage point of shared experience animism can no longer be regarded as a naïve projection of one’s own humanity on a mute and dead nature. The world of bodies and the world of meanings, of habits, of customs, of language and of the social order, necessarily arise from one another. They are all worlds of relations in which meanings unfold. Real individuals with true feelings experience these meanings from the inside and integrate them into their material worlds in a creative manner. Life produces its creative expression, is aesthetical, has codes, rites, practices of behaviour, pheromone-mediated warning signals, forms of parlance, poems, and rock paintings. Nothing is separated into two worlds. There is only one.

So the western dualism dissolves. From the inside, from the inner experience of biological subjects, being nature is society, and its means are culture and metaphor. From the outside it is body, and its means are hunting and gathering, touching and feeding. In one’s own body both collapse into one. Within my body I can experience how hunting and feeding do crucial relationship work: When a tiger eats a deer, he incorporates the energy of the prey and enlarges the reach of his power.

Feeding and hunting are cultural acts from the inside, and material changes from the outside. The wisdom of indigenous people consists in realising this from the start. Their genius is to have built cosmologies on that insight, allowing to construe a balanced exchange with the remainder of the world for hundreds of millennia.

Different from what the west still believes, there are no autonomous natural facts. Everything, which is seen as nature from the outside, proves to be culture from an inner viewpoint. At this stage matter inevitably becomes existential, personal concern. Retaining the conviction that all nature is also inward, meaningful, cultured has consequences, which for a westerner at first seem strange. They account for the “picturesque” and fairy-tale impression indigenous cultures first made to the colonisers. But they are also underlying the early stages of western culture, the “mythical age” of ancient Greece and the animistic Europe whose oral literature has transformed into fairy tales in which the animals can still speak and shift shapes.

From each other being's perspective (be they animals or spirits), the world is seen in the light of the respective species' culture. What to us seem neutral objects, for other beings can be charged with meaning in a similar way as are objects from our own culture for us, and may be accordingly associated with pleasure or disgust. If we know the culture of non-human beings, we can communicate with them. Castro (2015:251) observes that the inhabitants of the Amazon rainforest present corn beer to the jaguar and are convinced that from his perspective this is experienced as blood. What to us is soaked manioc, so presume the inhabitants of the forest, the spirits perceive as rotting corpses, and gladly accept as an offer.

The world has no objective character. It must be suffered and enjoyed from any possible perspective. It holds many

perspectives at once, and all beings experience a different one. This attitude, says the ecophilosopher and poet, Gary Snyder, can be observed in an exemplary way in the thought of Japanese eleventh-century Zen master, Dōgen. Snyder (1990:115) quotes Dōgen writing: “Dragons see water as a palace or a pavilion”. A detail of “nature” that humans superficially experience as beautiful in truth may be a part of a dragon’s palace, or the favourite dish of a rare predator.

To experience nature from the inside is an emotional process. It means that our own feelings are also part of the ecosystem. The world can be understood as the desire to be connected – and this understanding happens right in myself. Feeling is no private affair, but an organ of perception through which the relational character of the cosmos becomes manifest. It is a reality, which we continuously create (the “dreamtime” of ongoing creation), and we create it in togetherness (the “ubuntu” of the primacy of the other). How could the experiences of all those natural subjects appear other than through feeling?

We can see here that the rationale of animistic thinking is very different from the ideas, which guide western mainstream ecological attitudes. Animism builds on the “animation” of all life as a primary moving force. The west has forbidden this idea for a very long time, offering the pattern of separation and domination instead. Both paradigms are antagonistic to one another, while one of them (the western cognitive empire) claims intellectual superiority and ontological validity over the other. A lot of decolonisation work is still necessary. As Graham Harvey (2017:172) observes: “The West’s individual is thus a fiction whose well-being must be doubtful as long as it is sought in the maintenance of separation.”

## 6

### Kinship: An Ethics of Increase

*"There is balance in the world but no cause."*

**George Tinker**

We have seen that animism is not the naïve belief in demons inhabiting trees. It rather is a metaphysically sophisticated and astutely realistic way of understanding how persons come about through continuous processes of relation. Animism is confident that our inner experiences are key to share this realm of relations in a live-giving way. If we see the central philosophical problem of the west in the question of how the experiencing "I" is related to the infinity of the world (or, as Immanuel Kant asked, "how is inner experience possible?"), we have to accept that animism has an answer.

At the same time as animism offers an epistemological framework, it also provides a collective ethics. If the cosmos is able to create individuality by sharing the total, and manifold, then the human ethical challenge is how to perpetuate this creation. The necessity of perpetuating the creation is foundational for the practical ethics, which animism proposes. As with everything animistic practical means just that: The pledge of keeping the cosmos fecund must be lived rather than argued for. It is not an abstract attitude, but rather an – often even wordless – practice. To state it again in terms of western philosophy: In animism, ontology and ethics cannot be separated. Every detail of the cosmos has a value, because it is part of the personal culture of another species, and is meaningful because of that.

Western ecological thinking and philosophy, however,

explicitly attempt to separate existence and value. Existence is taken as objective fact (the material existence of things without interest), but value is always personal and private. As we will see in the course of this section, these are the reasons sustainability politics so often collides with indigenous practices. But while “environmental ethics” still struggles to supply reasons to protect other species, indigenous peoples have been able to manage ecosystems without destruction for extremely long periods of time. Western-minded sustainability projects are often less successful at that.

A lot of research notwithstanding, western mainstream philosophical discourse has not come up with a widely shared framework for an ecological ethics (for an overview see Holmes Rolston III, 1986). The relatively scarce proposals on how to frame ethics together with the land, with non-human species, and for a more-than-human community, which have arisen in the west are mostly critical about the western philosophical tradition and base their foundations on the deep ecology movement with its romantic roots and its Buddhist inspirations. The most influential positions of those “unorthodox” environmental ethics here are those by Joanna Macy, Arne Naess, Aldo Leopold and Gary Snyder.

All of those, although from different backgrounds, propose normative approaches that set out an ethics not for individual (human) subjects, as is common in the west, but for a community. Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethics” is probably the most known among those. Its rationale goes: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 1949). We need to note that Leopold developed these thoughts in the US, standing on land that had still harboured – and nourished – its original owners only few decades ago. Their maxims probably had not looked very different. Leopold comes to his insight on a common ground – but does not

quote (and might not be aware of) any direct inspiration by the American indigenous ways.

Gary Snyder (1990:163), the beat poet and Buddhist disciple, points to the closeness of early Buddhist teachings and an indigenous background. In fact, he says, the “structure of the original Buddhist order was inspired by the tribal governance of the Shakya (‘Oak tree’) nation – a tiny republic somewhat like the League of the Iroquois – with democratic rules of voting [...] Gautama the Buddha was born a Shakya – hence his appellation Shakyamuni, ‘sage of the Shakyas’. The Buddhist sangha is thus modelled on the political forms of a Neolithic derived community”. Snyder here brings several threads to a close. He continues: “So our models for practice, training, and dedication [...] can also look to original communities with their traditions of work and sharing.” Romanticism can, from this vantage point, be seen as a search for an original animistic cosmology and ethics.

In the previous section, we have seen that for the indigenous perspective the world is not static, but populated with persons. A person is somebody with whom we can (and even must) share. Sharing goes before the category of the individual. Relation comes first; it gives birth to individuality. This is already an ethical guideline. As Nurit Bird-Davies (1999:S72f) observes in the Nayaka people: “A Nayaka was normatively expected to share with everybody as and when present, especially (but not only) large game, irrespective of pre-existing social ties, criteria, and entitlement. Sharing with anyone present was as important as if not more important than effecting a distribution of things among people... the Nayaka sense of the person appears generally to engage not the modernist subject/ object split or the objectivist concern with substances but the above-mentioned sense of kinship [...] The person is sensed as ‘one whom we share with’ [...] Their composite personhood is constitutive of sharing relationships not only with fellow Nayaka but with members



of other species in the vicinity.”

### **“Kincentric Ecology”**

In animism, sharing is a cosmic pillar. Sharing is key to community, and sharing is key to self. I already mentioned, although only in passing, the African indigenous concept of “Ubuntu”, translating with “You are, therefore I am”. Anthropologist Enrique Salmón (2000:1331) observes in his seminal paper on “Kincentric Ecology”: “Indigenous people believe that they live interdependently with all forms of life. Their spiritual, physical, social, and mental health depends on the ability to live harmoniously with the natural world. Indigenous identity, language, land base, beliefs, and history are personifications of culture that regulate and manifest the health of the human as well as the natural world. It is understood that a person who harms the natural world also harms himself.”

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The idea of community is based on two notions: The idea that there is some powerful force equally accessible to all of its members, and that all members are responsible to replenish this force. This gives another spin to the understanding of society as the collective of all persons (human and non-human). The term “society” does not entirely grasp what is at stake, as it still carries a western-flavoured connotation of a domain brought about by conscious actors and their discourse. But the society of being is not only institutional, but physical relatedness. It is family. We cannot choose to not pertain to it – we can only rebel against it, or poison it with toxic behaviour. The human relationship to all other beings is that of kin.

Some readers will feel slightly uncomfortable when reading these words. “Family”, and worse, “family obligations” do not sound pretty to many in our society, in which family has often become the playing field of narcissistic spleens and disrespectful acting out – and consequently is often fled. But

in particular, the aspect of the combination of “kin” and “obligations” pretty much englobes what the rules of behaviour in animistic societies are about. You are part of the collective, and you need to nourish the collective. In turn, you can expect to be unconditionally nourished by it. It is important to retain here that many animistic societies are (again, against the cultural myth of the “Indian chief”) rather democratic in organisation (as was the tribe Gautama Buddha stemmed from).

We need to admit once again that indigenous peoples have a sharp intuition: From a biological standpoint, and in the light of evolution, humans and all other beings are indeed kin. Other animals are our ancestors. Our cells stem from the first living organisms in direct lineage. Each of us is the end of a single, uninterrupted line reaching back to when life began and which will only end with the death of the individual. Even the minerals are our kin, the earth’s water and air, as we find all these substances in our bodies, making up ourselves. From this point water and stone and air, the elements, are truly our flesh and blood.

Humans originally care for nature not because they take an advantage when they “think with animals” in order to better understand their own ideas. They even do not see nature as society only for the reason they experience it filled with persons. They see it as kin because it is – and therefore it must be related to as society. The original peoples take the similarities between human affairs and those of the living world at face value and construct from this similarity their motivation to keep the cosmos alive. Western metaphysics takes the differences and constructs from those a motivation to enslave the cosmos. That’s a pretty important distinction.

Being kin to non-human beings is an experience. It is not just a concept. It is a numinous and rare experience that nonetheless is part of our normal spectrum of experiences,

the experience of mystical awe and enigmatic wholeness, which most people have made a couple of times in their lives. These mystical and at the same time common experiences are an important part of animistic culture. Usually, anthropologists have been very bad translators of the frameworks in which those experiences are embedded, as apart from Christian-mystical rapture there was not really a place for them in western culture.

So, anthropologists ended up with misleading terms for the acute experience of cosmic kinship. English terms applied for these dimensions, which do not really render what is intended, are, for instance, “medicine” in case of the indigenous peoples of the USA, or “dreamtime” in case of the Australian aborigines. All those terms, however, signify something that might be translated as “mystical potency”. The Rarámuri, the people described by Salmón (2000:1328), use the word “iwigara” for an equivalent dimension. “Iwigara expresses the belief that all life shares the same breath. We are all related to, and play a role in, the complexity of life. Iwigara most closely resembles the concept of kincentric ecology,” writes Salmón.

Kinship is shared breath. Breath is what transforms the air of the atmosphere in plant flesh (when the plant breathes in during photosynthesis), and what transforms plant flesh back into the air of the atmosphere (through the animal metabolism). Breath is what transforms bodies into one another, lets the carbon atoms from the plant’s body settle as muscle in the animal’s flesh, and then travels on into the blue vault above our heads, englobing us all within the atmosphere. Kin then is fluid, it is what I can be, or have been. It is truly a shared body. It is truly participation in the same flow of blood. It is breath.

The mystical potency in sharing breath is an experience, and it is a necessity. If you relate to kin, you have no choice but to

be obliged, because it is kin, which nourishes you and which brings you forth. So again we see what cruel projection of their own superstitions the colonisers cast on the original peoples they encountered, when they assumed that those were worshipping demons in animal and plant bodies. Rituals are done in order to nourish community. Rituals are not done in order to subordinate to some demon or goddess.

Rituals – song, dance, painting (on sand, rock and bodies), sculpturing – are made to give back the nourishment that is provided by kin. If people sing songs in a ritual in order to invoke rain, they ask “that the land be nourished and that the land will nourish the people. The land is nourished by the results of the ceremony which brings rain. As the songs are performed, the iwi [the force of fertility] continues to turn” (Salmón 2000:1328). This is again an exchange of breath. The word “iwi [...] translates roughly into the idea of binding with a lasso. But it also means to unite, to join, to connect. Another meaning of iwi is to breathe, inhale/ exhale, or respire” (Salmón 2000:1328).

What colonists and the early anthropologists often have taken as superstition is in truth the practice to nurture life. This practice has not only a magical, ritualistic side. It also shows many practical aspects of care work. For the Raramuri described by Salmón, these practical aspects include labour such as planting edible corn and bean fields. Through this, the vegetables become available for the people. But also the other vegetation alongside corn and beans grows more abundantly through the cultivation process, which loosens and irrigates the soil (Salmón 2000:1329). In a cosmos of relations, caretaking is done to a mutual benefit.

From this it becomes clear that we cannot clearly differentiate between hunter-gatherer communities and agrarian peoples. In much of the anthropological literature, the egalitarian attitude of hunter-gatherer societies is contrasted with

the allegedly more controlling culture of agrarian cultures (“agrologistics”, Morton 2017). But as it has been observed by David Graeber (personal communication, 2018), the crucial feature is not if a given culture nurtures plants or just collects them, but the level of direct communication, which is at work between humans and non-human persons. Indigenous cosmologies already include the necessity to nurture kin. So the step to do this nurturing in a garden, and from there move to a plot of land, is small, and in some respect inevitable. Farming cultures can be based on reciprocity, as hunters can act out of the drive to dominate and destroy.

It is plausible that the original human cosmologies all build around the idea of nurturing what life has given. This attitude could even be imagined as a species-specific trait of the human species (which has been described as “biophilic” by some authors, as e.g. Wilson (1984), Shephard (1998)). The true cultural divide might not be found between early agrarian societies and hunter-gatherer tribes, but between land-users who treat country as kin, and those who treat it as matter and resource only.

Salmón (2000:1330) concludes in this vein: “Raramuri land management represents a tradition of conservation that relies on a reciprocal relationship with nature in which the idea of *iwigara* becomes an affirmation of caretaking responsibilities and an assurance of sustainable subsistence and harvesting. It is a realisation that the Sierra Madres is a place of nurturing, full of relatives with whom all breath is shared.”

### **Ethics as practical care**

An animistic ethics does not follow the demands of what is needed in order to be an ethical subject. It is not about obeying the demands of a transcendent god expecting deference from his creatures. It has nothing to do with “the moral good” in a Kantian sense, or with ethical obligations.

150 Still, interestingly, Kant's "categorical imperative" – the obligation to act in a way that the rule of your action could become ethical law – retains a flavour of the idea of reciprocity. Animistic ethics is not even called "ethics" by the original peoples. They often simply call it "law". The law is concerned with what is necessary in order to give life. In animistic law, there is no relevance to the hopeless question, which has impeded western ethics to embrace a moral system which includes non-human beings: How can we extend moral values to non-human subjects, when "subject" is a term reserved for humans (and, ultimately, only for those who subscribe to the societal contract)?

Within a western mindset, it is nearly impossible to include non-human persons into moral considerations. Still, we continuously treat them in ethically relevant ways. We constantly take from those persons, we live together with them in intimate proximity (think of the symbionts in your body), and human civilisation inflicts mass pain and death to those others. The impossibility to include them into an ethical reasoning is a profound problem in western moral thinking. We need to ask if western ethics is not only unable to heal antagonisms, but creates them in the first place.

Anthropologist Priscilla Stuckey (2013:192) criticises the "western conviction that nature, including human nature, is individualist, acquisitive, and competitive, so that what is considered animal becomes opposed to what is regarded as social". She argues that the "conflict between individual and society rests on a dualism of body and mind, with the body coded as selfish and instinctive, while only the mind or soul is able to connect with the larger collective" (Stuckey 2013:193). Traditional western ethical systems more or less explicitly rely on this dualism and for this reason privilege the mind of a (human) ethical subject over the body, hence excluding the remainder of the living world from ethical participation. In practical life, however, the proto-ethical matrix of biotic

relationships is mediated between bodies, not between rational subjects.

The Australian philosopher Freya Mathews sees the ability to think and act in terms of what gives fertility to the whole of the biotic community as a hallmark of a possible (and necessary) ecological civilisation. Her ideas follow the corresponding attitude, which we find in animist cultures, that the aims of the individual and the collective of beings are not truly in opposition, but are very much aligned: “In our modern societies we have entirely forgotten about desiring only what Earth-others need us to desire – and, so far, we have gotten away with this” (Mathews, 2020:52). A fair community with life would follow “a proto-moral principle of adaptative accommodation to the needs of the rest of Earth-life”. This, so observes Mathews, “broadly equates not only to wu wei, in ancient Daoist tradition, but to the normative principle, or Law, that is core to Australian Aboriginal cultures and that Aboriginal people read from land itself” (Mathews, 2020:52).

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Ethics in an animist perspective is conceived from the standpoint of what is necessary to contribute to the fecundity of a system or process of relationships developing in a given place or part of “country”. The resulting moral rules can be called a distributed ethics or a commons ethics, which privileges not the moral (human) subject, but the unfolding inter-subject of shared life. The ethical principle then is care for this shared life.

### **Power is relationship**

Many ecologists think (at least silently) that “humans” are detrimental to “nature”. They design nature preserves as exclusion zones from humans, often causing great distress to local populations, who frequently are the traditional “owners” of the land. The US Wilderness Act from 1964 defines wilderness as “land untrammelled by man”, an attitude that found

its way into many similar legal texts all over the planet. Wild here is understood as “unspoilt” in a western romantic sense, which means the absence of man.

This definition follows the old rules of the colonised mind, where the domains of “man” and of “nature” are forever separate. The only difference is that in the version provided by environmentalism, “nature” is not the root of all evil, but the harbour of all good. This stream of thought has its own lineage deeply down into enlightenment thinking, which cemented the split between human mind and the material world. An influential advocate of the idea that “nature” is the harbour of all good things was French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While “wild” means “evil” in the Hobbesian tradition, it means “good” in the Rousseauian heritage. But both lines of thought uphold a fundamental separation of human society and wild “nature” based on differences of substance. Humans are fundamentally different from other animals (the latter are “wild”, the former have “culture”), so a bold line must be drawn.

Asking truly “wild” peoples – peoples living in an explicit necessary epistemological and physiological exchange with the more-than-human world – we get a different answer. We learn that “wild” means to be in relationship, and to fulfill your part of the relationship in such a way that the collective of life does not unravel. Being wild means being involved in nurturing others – as those wild others also nurture us. Wildness is the drive of the world to generate persons and experiences through mutual nurturing. Wilderness to the western mindset is life-taking, whereas to the animist it is life-giving.



This merits another table for comparison:

Table 4  
Two different grounds for an “Ethics of the Wild”

“Wild” in the Western imagination	“Wild” in Indigenous Practices
Without rules	Based on rules
Egoistic	Devoted to mutuality
Threatening with death	Life-giving
Opposed to man	Including man
Emotionally detached	Profuse with feeling
Sublime	Nourishing
Stranger	Kin
Opaque to human understanding.	Transparent to thinking, sensing, feeling and intuition
Better off without man	In need of man
Requiring control	Requiring gratitude

If wild is relational, and life-giving, we can – and even must – take an active part in its unfolding. Australian anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (2013:139) observes accordingly: “Human groups hold the view that they are an extremely important part of the life of their country.” It is their duty to make increase possible. Is this allegedly central role a discouraging sign of human arrogance? Or is it an insight into our power, because we have the freedom to say no to our responsibility for nurturance, as the western/ global civilisation currently does? Humans play a central role in ecosystems, maybe we could say, because they will be damaged without our compliance.

Rose has collected some impressive insights into the

154 practice of ethics in animistic cultures. In Australia, the “totemic” system of separate kin groups to which humans adhere functions metaphorically as a tie between diverse human individuals, social groups and the non-human beings of country. The totemic system symbolically mirrors the set of existential relationships (prey/ predator, parasite/ host, niche-builder/ niche) of an ecosystem. The totemic links bind humans to the ecosystem, not in an analogous and purely “symbolic” fashion, but through various layers of obligations, as Rose (2013:140) describes: “Totemic relationships traced through three lines of descent, in systems of exogamy, ensure that people will have numerous non-human kin, and will, in effect, be members of several overlapping, but not identical kin groups”.

Members of the dingo kin group for example “are responsible for the flourishing of dingoes in the world, and this means as well that they are responsible for their own flourishing (as dingo people)” (ibid.). This constellation of finding one’s own identity in the presence of others leads, as Rose observes, to an enhanced vulnerability of the human members: If dingo, or emu, kin suffer, the humans adhering to the respective kin group inevitably suffer, too.

The totemic system of diverse kinships entangled humans deeply with the ecosystem. Accordingly, human powers, but also human responsibilities are increased. Rose (2013:141) summarises: “Kin responsibilities distribute interest and care across species and countries such that one’s individual interests are embedded within, and realised most fully in the nurturance of, the interests of those with whom one shares one’s being [...] The process of living powerfully in the world is thus based on nurturing the relationships in which one’s life indwells. Nurturance is neither infinitely obligatory, nor is it diffused and undifferentiated.”

Indigenous people engaged in increase rituals are therefore

not acting out of superstition and only in their own interest. Instead, they are rendering other beings a necessary (and often tiresome) service: “Increase rituals... [are] performed by members of a kin group with the explicit intention of singing up abundance within a species”, observes Rose (2013:142). The idea accompanying this is not just that “magic” works – but the conviction that we can direct our attention to other beings and that this has an effect, because it is felt by them. If we are acting as much on the “inside” of a reality profuse with feeling as on the material “outside”, acts of invocation change the meshwork of relationships.

Rose’s colleague Matthew Hall (2013:392) states accordingly: “At the basis of most good relationships is communication. In order to construct relationships with plant persons it is necessary to communicate with them, and recognise their presence... In Yanyuwa country, when the humans address songs directly to the cycad trees, they are not ‘worshipping’ them, they are singing in order to keep the trees healthy.” Such rituals are only a part of a wider set of work intended to make other beings flourish. Other parts are concrete rules of whose non-human beings can be consumed by humans and at what times, as Rose observes: “When an emu person [a human pertaining to the emu kin group in Aboriginal Australia] dies, nobody eats emu until the emu people tell them they can, and the first emu to be killed is treated with special ritual.” Rose (2013:142).

### **Can we become animists again?**

A critique of my approach to describe “animism” as a cosmology with an ensuing ethics might well be that all societies are different, so this sort of classification again shows the western colonising regard. What I do means to classify from the outside instead of to ask and to communicate, so the accusation could go. This caution remains valid indeed. Still it is a remarkable fact that so many different societies outside

urban/ hierarchical societies, and particularly outside the global western sphere of influence, retain basic similarities in regard to their cosmologies and the principles of interaction between humans and non-humans (co-creative nurturing of the cosmos) and between humans (egalitarian cooperation).

It is likely that animistic cosmologies have been the default way of human culture since the deep time of early-modern humans. If we compare contemporary ritualistic artifacts (rock art, sculpture) to historic ones, we can indeed observe a host of similarities. Insights into current ritualistic practice help us understand the meaning and rationale of prehistoric art, among others the enigma why the most spectacular of this art was done in the dark depths of caves like Altamira or Lascaux.

In an animistic cosmology, art is a means of reinforcing the mesh of relations between the persons in an ecosystem. It is a way to make visible the invisible dimension, which ties all beings together, and by making it visible, reinforcing it. Art and increase are never separable. Animistic art has an ethical function. Contemporary art has retained this – although the experiences of those animistic dimensions are relegated to the private sphere and are rarely discussed by professional critique. In animism, art is a gesture of giving back, of communicating with the spirits by building them a pleasing dwelling. It is not made for aesthetic contemplation. Again, the idea of a purely aesthetic perspective is a genuine western invention, which does not respect the fact that everything we do inevitably is ethical. Invoking the spirits – the inwardness of the nexus of unfolding creation – without personally welcoming to an animistic eye might count as reckless.

Relation always comes first. The “aesthetic” quality of the surface is the least important aspect. As is its visibility. This may explain why much indigenous art is destroyed after it has been produced, or executed in places which are barely

accessible, as in caves. Robert Wallis observes: “Thinking animically, this hidden art may have been produced for consumption by other-than-human-persons, and was only ever to be seen and actively engaged with by them. In this way, engagements between human-persons and stone-persons may be seen as two-way and relational rather than involving a one-way inscription of human meaning.” (Wallis 2013:322). In animism, art is part of the commerce of fecundity.

## Ecopolitics: Renouncing Immortality

*"Any inner-outer-dichotomy, with the human skin as boundary, is psychologically irrelevant."*

**A. Irving Hallowell**

To view other species as kin, and to incorporate them into a system of relationships makes that the human interests and obligations cannot be uncoupled from a specific place and its non-human inhabitants. For this reason, indigenous people are particularly vulnerable to habitat destruction and species loss. Non-human beings are part of their human identity. Stuck (2013:204) observes that "a relational ontology requires a local focus, to preserve the face to face care and nurturance shared with others". It requires being truly locally present in order to be fair and just. This is an important lesson for a western ecological approach where obligations to sustain other species are usually built upon abstract systemic properties of habitats (a species' place in the foodchain, or in a symbiosis).

We cannot imagine a politics of equality without heeding the acute necessities to share with the non-human family members, which are represented only through a specific place, through the food and water it offers, through the breath we share with it. This connection to the world of other living beings might seem negligible to a westerner's eyes. But it is of utter importance, as apart from a specific place relations become abstract, even those between humans. Relations are incomplete without being embedded in the

wider context of mutual care with non-human persons. True egalitarianism cannot work if non-human persons are excluded. True democracy requires the participation of all beings, not necessarily in a parliament of things, but in a collective of shared breath. This point poses a challenge for sustainability practices, which want to engage with indigenous ways. From an animistic viewpoint, sustainability cannot be achieved without entering physically into the web of relationships, which keeps one another mutually alive. There is no sustainability without fairness on an equal footing.

### **A family of equals**

Being “of” a place does not mean to own the place. A human member of a biotic community does not have property rights over other members or over the physical space. There are only obligations to care for this biotic community; there is no human dominion over nature. It is exactly this lack of power, which grants equality among all members of a biotic community. Nobody has the right to possess other persons.

When western debates about preserving nature meet indigenous struggles for keeping “country” intact, two totally different worldviews collide: The idea of property rights confronts the necessity of accommodating kin. For this reason, it should be obvious that indigenous view cannot be directly mapped on western legal structures. The western legal system very much relies on a concept of property, and property is about things – the very concept of property is dualistic. It is part of the heritage of the split world – humans here, things there; and humans with a lot of things on top, and those with fewer things below.

It is therefore doubtful if moves such as granting a river a legal status as a person, or even its own property rights (as has recently happened to the Whanganui river in New Zealand, Lurgio 2019) will change that in western thinking other beings

are viewed as things and therefore are means to personal enrichment. Property as a concept is not really imaginable from an animistic perspective. It directly destroys relationship – if I own you, you are not free to relate to me. The idea of property is the seed from which the western narcissism grows. In its most pathological, narcissism is about possessing other people. Every form of ownership of non-human participants in the cosmic exchange process keeps some traits of narcissism.

### **Narcissism is the deadly sin of ecology**

In western civilisation, it sometimes seems that narcissism is a prerequisite for success, since often the most narcissistic individuals obtain the most socially responsible positions. Indigenous cultures, however, frequently work in an active manner against “letting egos grow big”. They know that humans tend to dominate others. So many of these cultures have invented a set of rules to break that temptation. Many initiation rituals serve the purpose of subduing the personal ego (by showing that individuality is temporary and fragile). But there are many more customs to keep narcissism in check.

An interesting example of such a practice can be found in the Ju/'hoansi culture in Southern Africa. The Ju/'hoansi call this usage “insulting the prey” (Suzman 2017). It refers to the main source of animal protein, hunt. When a hunter comes back to the village, it is customary that the prey is shared among all inhabitants. If the hunter is particularly successful, and has killed a huge animal (and even needs to call for help as he cannot carry it alone), he is not applauded, but mocked. People ridicule his success, the bigger (and hence useful) the prey animal is. The inhabitants make comments such as “it wasn't worth the effort even to walk out if you come back with prey tiny as a fly” when in truth the hunter might have killed an eland antelope. Those remarks are rather scolds



than compliments. The reason for this, the Ju/'hoansi tell anthropologists, is to keep personal narcissism at bay.

Suzman (2017) quotes an Ju/'hoansi elder telling the anthropologist Richard Lee: "When a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man – and thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this ... so we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way, we cool his heart and make him gentle." This is a socially imposed negative feedback loop. A very good hunter will be discouraged disproportionately. Those most liable to become proud, to become arrogant, and to assume personal leadership are held back. To be mocked for being successful probably is painful for the individual hunter, who would like to see that his efforts and success are acknowledged. But it effectively blocks his temptation to become the local strongman.

In these and other cultural controls, who reaches up is put down. In order to maintain equal rights and equal access for all, rules have been established, which to westerners must seem brutal. Probably practices of this kind were widely distributed among neolithic cultures. Most had no formal government and no "chiefs". They relied on egalitarian self-governance. The static cosmos of the original peoples about which the western philosopher shakes her head ("I want to live in a world in which improvement is possible!") relies on the humiliation of the overblown ego. If this world, as it is, offers eternal fecundity, if it births individuality (including our own) required to steward and to nurture this fecundity, what can be improved in it? Why do humans need to be on top, if there is nothing gained over what is already there?

Man is the animal, some say, which knows that it will die. Presumably the other beings know this as well (all try to avoid their deaths). But they manage to live with the knowledge that they are mortal and accept that death exists. This is

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their greatness and their placidity, even if they have immense teeth. Man, however, has become the animal, which searches an escape from being mortal. He attempts to flee from mutuality, whose deepest expression is the complementarity of life and death. To do this, he controls his environment as tightly as possible. Today, man refuses to be mortal. He refuses to be edible. He refuses the ultimate sharing. This is his ecological distinction. And it is his ecological bestiality. But it is not proven that this is an inevitable character trait. It is rather likely that it goes back to a cultural choice.

Western culture is grounded on obstructing mutual transformation, which is the core process of ecosystems. Mutual transformation requires all individuals to die at some point. It is cyclical, as it always leads to new creation. If mutual transformation is blocked, creation comes to a halt. There is nothing less ecological than immortality. Nothing is less egalitarian in a world of mortals, which gains its strength because it is edible and by this can birth itself everyday anew. To put the own ego in the first place means claiming immortality. This is the deadly sin of ecology. For this reason, indigenous cultures suppress the concentration of power in single members of their community.

Also in this respect, animistic societies teach us an important lesson: An egalitarian approach to other species goes hand in hand with fundamental equality among humans. One cannot be separated from the other. Equality among humans requires that we put ourselves on an equal footing with non-human persons. We have to reject domination completely, otherwise it will always creep back in.

### **Acephalous societies**

The colonisers did not wholly grasp what they found when they discovered the different societies of traditional Africa and the tropical South America. The communities did not

have leaders, there were no tribal chiefs, but councils of elders (in Ghana those are still called the “committee”). In South America, the conquistadores were consternated: The Indians did not know power, they did not know sin and they did not know hell, the first missionaries wrote back to Spain in horror.

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Technically such societies are called “acephalous”. They have no-one in charge and are thus “headless” (cephalos in Greek means head). We can see the pejorative element in that term: A headless body is pretty savage, like that of a jellyfish. For the western colonists, all of them underlings of more or less authoritarian regimes, rule was in order. Anybody who does not subordinate to authorities, so goes the prejudice, stands on a lower cultural step, close to what Hobbes had called the “Leviathan”, the all-devouring nature.

Many mistranslations further distorted western understanding of indigenous politics and social organisation. In the territory of today’s Ghana, for example, the (temporary) speaker of the committee was addressed as “chief” by the British (and is still called so today). The colonial power, organised hierarchically, was not able to make better sense of this social role. So the “tribal chief” who plays such a central role in western literature from Cooper’s “The Leatherstocking Tales” to German writer Karly May and his “Winnetou” – series of novels to “Pocahontas”, in reality was a rare aberration. Going back in history shows that a distinct leader must be seen as a more recent development than the original acephalous groups. The “tribal chief” as a general phenomenon exists as little as the original capitalism by barter and the natural state of pitiless war against one another. The chieftain pageantry, his state and absurd ostentation, are mainly reflexes of a European disease. This is the idea that we need to surrender to an authority, which is cut off from other humans and non-humans and from country and its creatures.

Looking more deeply into the culture of, for example, traditional Africa, we learn that its communities are not controlled by a chief, but governed by an elder who is supported by a council of other members of the community. These are often chosen by consensus among all members. What we find there is a form of basic democracy, where no one obtains a position that is intrinsically more powerful than others, or that cannot in principle be held by any other. Power is not hereditary but a distinction for a limited time. It is as fluid and distributed as it is in an ecosystem.

In Ghana, the British colonists modified this original structure according to their hierarchy of powers. They gave the responsible elder the status of a dependent, local or regional king, and assigned to all others the roles of subservient objects. A regent was created and the tribe could be managed. But by this the common participation in the flows and transformations of the cosmos for all had become impossible. Particularly regarding African history, the European incursion on indigenous societies was by far not the first influence of a centralised power. There have been many African empires in the course of the centuries, and as everywhere the emmeshment of indigenous and centralised, more hierarchical societies was complex.

### **Commons as politics of kinship**

Animistic societies provide a model for the idea of the commons. I have already hinted to the close connections between commons practices and animistic cultures above. At this point we can take a deeper look at the ontological and ethical role of this form of exchange with the world. Practising a commons means to participate in a collective that distributes to its members the rights to use and the obligations to nurture at the same time. This collective is not conceptually different from the place where it unfolds ("country"). It correspondingly embraces everyone and

everything of a given locality. Being part of a commons means that everybody can use, but also that everybody must contribute; everybody receives, everybody provides something. There is neither “inside” nor “outside”. There is no privileged user and no private property. Within a commons, no resource is extracted, but a process of relationships is nurtured. A fundamental mutuality creates the individuals and the overarching whole to which they belong through the same gestures. Participants in the commons are not its operators, but its elements, as are all other entities and beings who are participating in the process of reciprocity, i.e. “country” and its inhabitants. Nothing belongs to one person alone, but all belong to one another. The best explanation of a commons, therefore, is to understand it as a way to organise “fecundity in reciprocity”.

We can stress five general points here (which I have all extensively discussed elsewhere, so I will only briefly summarise their import for the process of self-decolonisation. See Weber 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2019):

- ≈ Commons are truly egalitarian in a trans-species and trans-category way.
- ≈ Commons are not only structural organisations, but also dimensions of inner experience, which are constitutional and cannot be separated from structural aspects.
- ≈ Commons are the way how each ecosystem, and hence the whole earth-system (or “Gaia”), organises itself, so that life itself can be seen as commons.
- ≈ All exchange in a commons is understood as gift, with the original gift being the cosmic creation.
- ≈ All reciprocity in a commons is based on rules, which organise giving and receiving.

It would be fruitful for commons research and activism (which is a quickly developing field today) to further develop the awareness how deeply indigenous societies are embedded in the commons paradigm, and therefore how profoundly the way of the commons is entangled with our past as a species and our cultural history.

The reason why the reality of indigenous commoning – and the existence of according cosmologies based on a practice of the commons – have not been put centre stage in commons discourse is again the different starting point of western thinking. Contemporary commons philosophy inserts itself in western discourse about sustainability policies, whereas the lived commons of animistic communities are basically not technical, but ritualistic. They have to be performed in order to be understood. In order to live a commons, animistic people include all species, and the spirits. That's a thing hard to swallow for western activist discourse, be that as advanced as it can be.

Animistic societies can give us glimpses into many of the conundrums of commoning and their possible solutions (as much as the society of other beings, the biosphere, can grant us more understanding in this respect). One important insight might be that we can understand commons as the economies and politics of kinship. Kinship is not meant in the sense of political nepotism, evidently, but in the sense that exchange builds on the notion of being necessarily and profoundly related, and that any exchange can only go along these lines of relation, creating them and recreating them, unless it becomes destructive. In this respect, a family is a model for a commons, too.

### **Colonisation always destroys the commons**

In historical times, commons had been widely distributed in the occident (starting from being the only form of allocation

and distribution in prehistory). When thinking proceeded to separate reality into subject and object – or consumer and commodity – those in power transformed the commons into their private property (Weber 2012). This process became possible because the non-human participants of reality were more and more conceived of as separate things. In Europe, the destruction of the commons came to its bloom in the time when Thomas Hobbes wrote his “Leviathan” with its attack against the “natural state”. The importance of “objective science” rose steeply, denying other forms of knowledge and perception. The enclosure of the commons became an enclosure of the soul, which censored the inner experience of shared aliveness, and which contributed to the “coloniser’s mind” the westerner has developed. The enclosure of the commons was a process of colonisation, and like all of those processes, it entrenched the unequally distributed power and actually worsened the overall quality of relationship, but did so in the name of a better episteme.

The colonisation again was a destruction of the commons on a material, cosmological and psychological level. The European newcomers attacked the three main pillars of the commons, its social aspect (the egalitarian reciprocity), its animate aspect (the identity of the humans, which is the identity of “country” in reciprocity with its non-human inhabitants) and its ecological aspect (the nurturing of “country” through a careful culture in mutuality and through ritual gifts). In a way, the colonisers destroyed everything that they had lost themselves long ago, leaving behind desperate and hungry souls in danger of forgetting what they had been.

This colonisation is far from over. Today, it goes by the name of “landgrabbing”. Multinational corporations take away the country from the remaining subsistence cultures in the tropical zones of the earth, and prevent the original custodians from access, as they do not have official property titles. The inhabitants are unable to defend themselves, just as they

were at the times of the first waves of european colonisation. Private property destroys the fundamental reciprocity humans need in order to live. Historically, it was incredibly easy to take land from the original people: They gave it away themselves. The aboriginal elder Margaret Kemarre Turner (2010:133) recounts that when the white man arrived, aborigines gave him the right to use the land whose stewards they had been. They acted according to the rule that the land was a gift to all.

Humans who belong to a culture of sharing are doomed in a world, which does not share but distributes, which separates but does not renew connections. This understanding helps us to better grasp the misery of the post-colonial world. Crushed between traditional human existence, which is devoted to renew the collective and englobes not only people but all beings, and a world, which uses all beings as objects in order to build a secured fortress for the powerful, life bleeds away.

Indigenous people do not survive colonisation undamaged, because capitalism, which is part of the package colonisation comes with, eats up unreserved mutuality. Capitalism feeds on unconditionality. Capitalism devours life, and it eats those, who do not think of other but to be of service of this life, who nurture life, who celebrate life-giving relationships. Capitalism feeds on what has been standing at the centre of animistic practice for hundreds of thousands of years. Capitalism runs on those who make themselves edible, but all its products are totally unpalatable. It transforms a world of mutual nourishment in a toxic wasteland.

### **Ecology of the gift**

The importance of mutuality manifests in the passion of indigenous humans to offer gifts. The central role of the gift shows up in many small things, like the rituals of gratitude



through which indigenous people demonstrate that they have received what they need for a living as gifts and that they take responsibility for not wasting them. In some communities, meat is distributed in such a way that the successful hunter gives all his prey away and then is gifted back just the amount he needs for himself. Everyone who needs something is cared for by the community.

“Generosity is simultaneously a moral and a material imperative”, says US-American nature writer and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013:381) about her own culture. She is a member of the Potawatomi people and therefore familiar with both perspectives: The imperial dogma of the west and the indigenous traditions of “Turtle Island”. Kimmerer (2013:381) observes:

*“Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away [...] In a culture of reciprocity, everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again.” To give does not follow a personal, but a cosmic reckoning.*

“The economy of the gift” is frequently discussed in western debates about new economic models. Indigenous people live inside of it. It is the deep economy of our species and has been so for hundreds of thousands of years. The choice of words which compose the term is not entirely correct, however: It is not about economy, but about ecology, the household of relations in which every participant plays a vital role for another. Everyone gives something to the others – and gets something back from someone else. The sun, water, food, the language in which one grows up, all this quenches existential desires and inspires existential needs to share. Neither in the natural world, nor in the indigenous cosmos, are those gifts something that must be earned. They are the gifts given to anyone in need.

170 Kimmerer (2013:3ff) has examined how deeply this culture of the gift has marked the worldview of indigenous America. She recounts the history of her people's creation, starting with the mythical ancestor of the human race, Skywoman. At the beginning, Skywoman sank down to earth from the air, in slow spirals, like a maple seed. And then she was down here, alone, in need of help. She was dependent on the help of the non-human beings, and these heeded her need. In order to save her, one of them even gave his life for her. So the creation story of Kimmerer's people, the Potawatomi, starts with two gifts: Skywoman falls from the sky, like the sunlight, and an animal gives himself away in order to donate his life to her.

For Kimmerer (2013:28) the gift is essential in order to create mutuality. "The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity." In a world of giving, relationships count, not the height of the barriers, which everyone has erected against the others by heaping up things around him.

## 8

# Rules for Behaving Well in the Society of Being

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*“Animism is about what it means to be alive in the world.”*

**Tim Ingold**

This essay has started as an attempt to show how important animistic practices and beliefs are for a practice of sustainability that overcomes the traumatic heritage it stems from. The essay then has unfolded into an argument for self-decolonisation. I propose self-decolonisation as the first requirement to understand those cultures that have never truly stepped out of the experience that the cosmos is a vast collective engaged in nurturing aliveness. I hold that nurturing aliveness – one’s own and that of the others, which, if done with the innocent intent of providing nourishment, is indistinguishable (Weber 2017) – is the most important step towards a different ecological practice. In this chapter I will make some practical suggestions about how to interact with the persons that constitute an ecosystem (a local commons of reality).

Interacting with non-human persons is not a technical procedure. It is not about learning the right skills from indigenous societies, albeit those skills often require a particular attitude, and therefore acquiring them can lead to nurturing one’s aliveness. What we need in order to nurture life (the own and that of others) is animistic practice. I say this with the same emphasis as the Buddhist who calls what he does not “worship”, but practice. And as Buddhist teacher Dōgen reminds us: “When you find your place where you are,

practice occurs” (quoted according to Snyder 1990:27). It is likely helpful if we understand the technology implicated in the management of indigenous commons, but alone it will never get to the point. In the hands of the westerner, this knowledge will become just another technical means, a tool in treating the world as an object. The first step, however, is precisely to stop treating the world as an object, but to approach it as a personal other instead, a “thou”. If we are open to communicate with gratitude and the pledge for reciprocity, everything is already there, and not much more is needed. For this is what the reality is about: Communicating in reciprocity.

I remember attending a workshop on the ontologies of the commons, which went for several-days. International experts were invited, and there was even a small minority stemming from indigenous backgrounds, and from countries in which this is background is still present as part of everyday experience. There was much talk about ontologies. But the only ontology present was the western conviction that the best approach to the world is to observe its building blocks, construct hypotheses, discuss them, and thereby try to smash competing hypotheses. The participants talked and some of them tried very hard to be right in order to trump the other’s arguments and prevail.

A change only came when the group decided to hold a session in the presence of the local river, a beautiful, although visibly suffering body of water, flowing in sight of the workshop venue, but not visited by any participant before. The simple act of asking to be received, and of promising to provide fecundity, with the water at our feet murmuring a continuous answer of invitation, did everything to change the course of the talk. It was then that I understood that in order to be truly helpful to the non-human persons with whom we share our breath, we do not need to struggle over better theory (and over who wins). We need to ask for permission to

enter into the commons of mutual nurturing again, and we need to pledge to give back. We need to truly do this, with our voice, and our skin.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013:183) has given a remarkable account of the attitude, which is needed in order to achieve this reconnection. It is not about technique, or skills, or the right requisites. It is about real care, care on the heart level, of truly seeing the (non-human) others with whom we share. It is about taking reciprocity seriously, as Kimmerer suggests: “Know the ways of the ones who take care of you so that you can take care of them.” Kimmerer calls the attitude to approach others in order to ask them to share their world with us the “Honorable Harvest”. She has developed the according set of rules particularly for the situation of humans “taking” from the natural world, for food or for clothing. But the “Honorable Harvest” is a guide to any form of relationship with non-human (and human!) others. Its “ancient rule is not just to take only what you need, but to take only that which is given” (Kimmerer 2013:184). The principles of the “Honorable Harvest” are:

*Introduce yourself.  
Be accountable as the one  
who comes asking for life.*

*Ask permission before  
taking. Abide by the answer*

*Never take the first. Never  
take the last.*

*Take only what you need.*

*Take only that which is given.*

*Never take more than half.  
Leave some for others.*

*Harvest in a way that  
minimises harm.*

*Use it respectfully. Never  
waste what you have taken.*

*Give thanks for what you  
have been given.*

*Give thanks for what you  
have been given.*

*Give a gift in reciprocity for  
what you have taken.*

*Sustain the ones who sus-  
tain you and the earth will  
last forever.*

*(Kimmerer 2013:183)*

These principles are to be taken seriously. This is the animistic requirement. We need to comply to them literally. “Introduce yourself” means “say the truth about who you are”. Say it. Speak. Communicate. Talk in front of a tree. Introduce yourself in the presence of a twig full of cherries. “Be accountable” means “really do grasp that you are in a relationship in which your actions affect a sentient person”. And so on down on the list.

For the western mind, and particularly for academic thought, this is a near-to impossible task. (At least in a professional setting. It may happen everyday with one’s pet animal or within the own garden). This is so, because the practice of reciprocity as taught by Kimmerer very much relies on our embodied experience sensing the reality of other, human and non-human, persons. The attitude of the “Honorable Harvest” presupposes that we are indeed able to communicate as part of the wider collective of life, and that we need to do so in order to nurture this collective. The communication, which makes this possible, comes first. To communicate –

to present yourself and to be receptive – is more important than a sophisticated plan what to do, or a technical manual, and it is vastly better than to teach others.

If we build on the insights of modern biosemiotics, if we trace back the connections, which psychologically and physiologically link us to a meshwork of bodies with whom we share one life, this insistence on true communication with other beings does not need to seem so out of the ordinary. In the terminology of western philosophy, the attitude, which underlies this sort of relating is called “Panpsychism” (Mathews 2003, 2009). Panpsychism argues that every material process from a different perspective is a subjective experience.

Panpsychism is on the rise in mainstream philosophical discussion. For a long time, it had a hard time among a mainstream science denying any ontological subjectivity and determined to do away with feeling. While debating is the according practice for a dualistic metaphysical approach (talking about), feeling is the necessary means for a panpsychistic worldview (feeling with). Allowing ourselves to feel is the requirement for communication with non-human persons, for listening to them and asking to be heard by them. Feeling communication is at the same time precisely what needs to be achieved by our self-decolonisation. These are not magic skills out of reach for an ordinary western human. To the contrary: We are practising feeling all the time, as we are alive and cannot help to be.

Standing in the presence of a flowering rose and feeling – even inexplicably – drawn towards it, feeling compelled to become active and productive in the presence of its beauty already is a deep communication. So observes nature educator Barry Patterson (2005:136): “A communication with a tree is first and foremost a feeling in your body.” Many of our western practices in the minor sciences of art and poetic understanding are communications with the collective of

the other-than-human world. For a member of an indigenous society the experience of awe and beauty in the presence of “nature” certainly is communication. The others speak to us through our feelings.

So there is a lot of exchange with other persons already going on in our daily lives. We only need to make it explicit, and we need to rescue this experience from the disqualification as “private anecdotes” and the estrangement of being seen as “aesthetic perceptions” only, as mere re-enactments of memes from cultural history. If the others are kin, being welcomed by them instills in us the feeling of being nurtured by family. What the west calls the experience of beauty hence in depth might be the realisation to be kin. It might be the experience to be looked at, to be called, the invitation by this kin to partake, and to nurture back with one’s own capacity to give life (Weber in Van Horn, Kimmerer & Hausdoerffer, forthcoming). We should never underestimate the degree to which an other looks at us while we observe her or him. We should never misunderstand a sensuous contact with otherness as a purely causal event of “having a sensory perception”.

The other persons being present in the collective of life communicate their presence, and they give back our gaze, or even return it before we have started to properly watch. The meshwork of bodies sharing breath, as animism holds and everyday involvement confirms, lives through inner experience and the encounter of other person’s inner experiences as much as it does through material exchange. Everything we encounter on the material plane is also a communication on the animate plane. Every sensuous happenstance is as well a dialogue between beings. This dialogue happens very much on a bodily level, as for example the dialogue between our liver and our red blood cells. But it is nonetheless not machine-like and “purely physiological”, to the contrary.

As the liver-erythrocyte-dialogue is providing us with life,



and any disturbance in their communication is potentially life-threatening, their body-talk is present to us as our inner experience, and mood. It is expressed in a language that is difficult to translate in words. But it is nonetheless expressed in an idiom that we understand, because it is the conversation that we are ourselves. It is the communicative process that brings us forth and connects us to all other persons that are equally linked to physiologies and matters of exchange (as in the water or carbon cycle). We converse in a language that is not unknown to us. It is only unknown to our conscious use of reason, which privileges thinking over perceiving. But all is said, although we might need a moment to translate.

Take this moment and look into the trees with their branches moving slowly, and then more quickly, and then slowly again with the wind. And then imagine that everything outward is an expression of the collective of being that nurtures us, and that asks to be nurtured back. Every whisper of the leaves brings its inwardness with it, every gust of wind is from a world, which does not differentiate between mind (us) and body (them), but is both always. And then maybe for a short moment you can perceive that the wind is the breath of someone, and that it meets you as another someone. Imagine that the trees swaying in the breeze, the foliage moving strongly here, only slightly there, then stirring in a soft wave of air, and then calming down again, are actually one being moving and breathing, and expressing her presence.

Cultural anthropologist and ecophilosopher David Abram has developed this experience into a theory of the ubiquitous animistic spirits as the “Invisibles”, as the sensuous excitement we feel when in touch with the collective of other life. Abram (2013:132) says: “The spirits are not intangible; they are not of another world. They are the way the local earth speaks when we step back inside this world.” Then it is less difficult to know that we are addressed, although it remains difficult to discern the meaning of it. Abram goes on: “By speaking

of the invisibles not as random ephemera, nor as determinate forces, but as mysterious and efficacious powers that are sometimes felt in our vicinity, we loosen our capacity for intuition and empathetic discernment.” This is the sort of experience, which lays the track for a proper communication with the other beings present in the local collective of life.

Here is not the place for a presentation of different practices of communication with those “Invisibles”, with the persons populating the “more-than-human-world” (Abram 1996). Two things are important to mention, though: First, reconnecting to the living world can be done by everyone. It does not require expert knowledge, as it builds on our own inborn practical capabilities to be alive and to nurture life-giving relationships, and to feel if those relationships are providing nourishment. It builds on our capacity to be true to ourselves, and true to others, and to really wish to provide for reciprocity. In the worlds of sustainability activist and mentor Elizabeth Ferguson “so much of it is simply knowing the world to be alive and feeling and to experience great gratitude and relationship to it” (Elizabeth Ferguson, personal communication). The heart leads, not the adherence to any techniques or schools.

Second, westerners need the guidance by indigenous people. Westerners need to be humble. They need to be willing to learn and to unlearn. They need to be willing to truly do the work of transformation in order to work away the trauma. They need to accept that what is necessary is the readiness to not prevail as a protected ego, but to allow this ego to dissolve into the family of being and then from there be born again. Fecundity comes first. The other comes first.

Here is a proposal of what to do before any activity takes place at any given location. It is simple, but if taken seriously, can establish a basic openness for communication. Everything else will come from there.

**Arrive. Don't get busy immediately. Don't cater to your needs first. Go ask what is the need here.**

**Walk around without aim. Let yourself be drawn by your intuition to where you are called.**

**Be attentive. Where is North, where is South? Where is the wind coming from? What birds are singing? What sounds are around?**

**Listen for the spirit of the place. Try to sense its mood – the atmosphere of the location. Try to feel what it needs.**

**At the place where you feel called to (where you feel best, actually), rest, and ask for reception. Use simple words and speak in a normal way.**

**Pledge to work in favour of fecundity. Pledge reciprocity. Pledge that your work here will be a gift to this place and to all its beings.**

**Breathe. Perceive. Sense. Listen to answers with all senses and all of your capacities to receive: Think, perceive, feel and intuit.**

**Take only what is given.**

**Think of what you can offer. Tell what you can offer (“Spontaneity. Precision. Perseverance. Grace”. Or what is your strength, and your love?)**

**Leave a gift.**

**Start your work.**

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## Acknowledgments

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This essay was in many respects nourished by the collective agency which helps new beings to be born and old ones to be cared for. My thanks go to Marion Mueller, of the India office of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, who birthed the idea and found me to try to put it into words. I owe gratitude to the staff of the Böll Stiftung in New Delhi and Berlin, among others Chok Tsering, Jost Pachaly, Felix Speidel, and Heike Löschmann, who as always pulled the first strings. I am also deeply grateful to the scientists, writers, and artists, who met the draft essay with attention and patience and resonated with it in their unique, and profoundly inspiring ways. This was a truly co-creational process. Now it is a profoundly collective work. Thanks to Shrishtee Bajpai, Uttam Bathari, Linda Chhakchuak, Kaustubh Deka, Sonal Jain, Daniel Langthasa, Aküm Longchari, Bhagat Oinam, Ash Narain Roy, Jayanta Kumar Sarma and Meghna Singh. I also want to express my gratitude to Chrischona Schmidt and her husband from Ikuntji Artists in Haast's Bluff, Australia, whose generosity was essential to help me enter country that is still sung and that still sings. I am also deeply grateful to the ladies from Barkly Art/ Tennant Creek at the Desert Fest in Alice Springs, particularly to Fiona Corbett and to Elaine Sandy who gave me the skin name of her brother. Thanks to Luz Zenaida Hualpa Garcia who reminded me that we are all part of the collective of life. Joulia Strauss put me in the right place, as she always does. Mriganka Madhukaillya transmitted the call of the wide river that still needs to be heard. Abhishek Chauhan created a masterful layout with extremely suggestive illustrations. Priya Ranjan Sahu took patient care of the copyediting. And Alessandra provided pasta and partnership in the time of lockdown, which was when this work was born.







ANIMISM

ANIMISM

Sir Edward Tylor's



Meghna Singh

## Naming and citation as recognition

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This essay responds to Andreas Weber's essay by intentionally disavowing a linear process of thought, meandering from fragment to fragment to perform a refusal of scholarly thinking as imposed by traditional academic structures. Nonetheless, through its meandering this work identifies the epistemological erasure of full lived realities of different indigenous cultures and communities that is enacted through white scholarship (such as Andreas Weber's) that places these cultures into one solid, monolithic category. Through multiple threads—one tracing the writer's own growing awareness of non-human beings in her home environment during the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown period in New Delhi, another following Weber's process of citations and (lack of) nomenclature for 'animist' cultures in his essay—this work hopes to enact and highlight the ways in which careful, attentive naming and citation are ways of enacting kinship and recognising them as equal different cultural ways of knowing.

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About one week into working from home as a result of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown in New Delhi, I noticed that, in one corner of the balcony adjacent to my flat's living room, two house sparrows were diligently at work, building a nest amidst the vines and branches of along-established, sprawling Rangoon creeper.

Over the course of the next few weeks, sitting in the living room and working on the laptop that had suddenly become the primary gateway to my entire social and professional universe, I found myself frequently taking time to look away from the screen and out the balcony, to the corner of my home



that I now knew I shared with the sparrows. In the eight or so hours that we spent in parallel spaces—them in the balcony, me at work at the dining table, separated by glass doors—I began to notice and eventually recognise the particular rhythms that this pair of birds followed through the day. The male, with its black-bibbed throat, coming and going more frequently, bringing back bits of grass, plants, twigs; the mornings when both were gone for long stretches of time. The song from the small flock of sparrows roosting beyond the balcony in the tall tree, a group my house pair sometimes would join, became increasingly noticeable, familiar.

In the complete absence of traffic sounds and human voices from the streets below, as the lockdown continued and migrant workers en masse began to leave Delhi's urban centres, the sparrows' chirps took on a voice of their own—standing out as a particular voice in the birdsong that, all at once, was louder than I had ever heard it during my lifetime in this city.

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“Being kin to non-human beings is an experience. It is not just a concept,” Andreas Weber writes in his essay on animistic worldviews and ecological participation, a statement I immediately feel a resonance with, an embodied response that understands that to enact these kinships is not to follow an intellectual imperative but, instead, one that is a more ‘natural’, once-intrinsic response. I have been, in the moments of looking out the window, for instance, felt a kinship with the sparrows in my balcony, felt an interest and a stake in their lives. One of the precursors to recognising these relationships is time, attention: It is only in looking away from my laptop that the world around me, its movement and iterations of life, come into focus again, provide the possibility for recognition and for kinship.

In her book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention*

Economy, artist and writer Jenny Odell argues that the neo-liberal subject's time and attention have been increasingly colonised by the capitalist economy's insisting on a singular kind of 'productivity', leaving us with little by way of attending to the 'commons' of our interrelated lives and ecologies. Making an analogy with the increasing decrease in public commons (parks, libraries) across industrialised and industrialising countries, Odell says,

*"[T]hose spaces deemed commercially unproductive are always under threat, since what they can 'produce' can't be measured or exploited or even easily identified... Currently, I see a similar battle playing out for our time, a colonisation of the self by capitalist ideas of productivity and efficiency. One might say that the parks and libraries of the self are always about to be turned into condos."*

From which, for me, two questions arise: How do we create the possibilities of experiencing kinship with non-human beings in lands that have managed to relegate the non-human to the margins, that have increasingly taken away our islands of greenery, trees, forests, ponds?

And secondly: How has the taking away of our 'commons'—the green as well as the psychological, interior landscapes within us—affected our kinship with human beings who have been 'othered' to us through the ages along the lines of caste or class, race or ethnicity? Alongside the urgency of solidifying kinship with non-human beings, is the solidifying of kinship with human beings who have been 'othered' to us not equally urgent as well?

Noticing these house sparrows as (some of the many other) beings with whom I was sharing my home was a recognition in the truest sense of the word: A re-collection, a return, a knowing again. In the South Delhi home where I grew up, the small veranda and garden where I would sit with my

grandmother before it was time for school was always full of sparrows: Chirping at the base of the rubber tree, from the low bushes of the crepe jasmine. I remember that my grandmother would frequently put down the newspaper she was reading to look at the birds; I remember that there would always be a nest in the nook under the stairway in the corner.

Over the years, the number of sparrows began to lessen, eventually disappearing from the garden altogether—a slow erasure that I did not notice while it was happening, until one grey morning in my mid-twenties when the silence, the absence of their song, cut cold.

More from Jenny Odell, this time on bird-watching:

*“What amazed and humbled me about bird-watching was the way it changed the granularity of my perception, which had been pretty ‘low-res’. At first, I just noticed birdsong more. Of course it had been there all along, but now that I was paying attention to it, I realised that it was almost everywhere, all day, all the time. And then, one by one, I started learning each song and associating it with a bird, so that now when I walk into the Rose Garden, I inadvertently acknowledge them in my head as though they were people: ‘Hi, raven, robin, song sparrow, chickadee, goldfinch, towhee, hawk, nuthatch...’ and so on. The sounds have become so familiar to me that I no longer strain to identify them; they register instead like speech.”*

In being attentive to the other beings around her, in listening to the sounds of the non-human world and slowly coming to correlate a particular kind of song with a particular kind of bird, the earlier undistinguished whole of ‘birdsong’ reveals itself to the human subject to be comprised in fact of many different voices, of many different non-human agents. Ravens, with their own particular habits and intelligences, the soaring and swooping cries of hawks, the staccato of the smaller finches.

To name the non-human that has been cast into a category

of being all of its own, to differentiate and name the particular and the unique amongst what has been shoved into an amassment of ‘background noise’ or ‘other’ for the neoliberal human subject’s experience—to do this is to acknowledge the richness of being, the difference of subjectivities, the particularities of the non-humans that surround us. A step towards recognising that the world outside the human individual’s subjective experience is as rich, varied, complex as what is within. A step towards recognising the non-human as equal, a step towards kinship.

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What one notices almost immediately while reading Andreas Weber’s essay is that there is, in the author’s descriptions of ‘animist’ traditions and cultures as well as those of the ‘western subject’, a particular lack of particularity. Which is to say: Weber does not, through the majority of his essay, attend to the names of the cultures and thought systems he is thinking about, thinking through. The locations and cultures where this thinking emerges from are not named, the names these locations and cultures give themselves are not named. The reader is left to believe that one culture is, in fact, interchangeable with the other, connected to each other in their ‘animism’—with their differences and particularities completely erased.

The erasure enacted by this conflation of cultures into one category is taken further by the use of the word ‘animist’. Weber writes: “As we know, no indigenous community describes itself as ‘animist’ – at least outside of the need to adopt a western vocabulary. Referring to themselves, people use much more concrete identifiers.” If that is the case, then why does the writer persist in classifying a varied set of cultures, practices, beliefs into the undifferentiated, generalised category of ‘animist’? While acknowledging that the western human subject needs to expand a sense of kinship

and equality to non-human beings, does the western human subject not see that he is, still, not quite expanding a sense of kinship and equality to the non-western human beings whose complexities he is reducing to a category or label that they themselves would not use?

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Perhaps in some ways it's clear that, in his essay, Weber is addressing only the western subject, speaking to said subject about the urgent need for self-decolonisation. But even so, one would think that self-decolonisation would include, too, an eschewing of western vocabulary, choosing instead to speak of and with the 'other' through the 'more concrete identifiers' they might use—with recognising their speech as speech, their names as names.

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*Who is human, who is 'other', and who is kin?*

Naga peace activist Aküm Longchari, in his book *Self Determination: A Resource for JustPeace*, thinks alongside anthropologist and African Studies scholar Marimba Ani, saying:

*"Ani reminds us that a crucial aspect of European culture for understanding its imperialistic posture is the European cultural creation of the 'cultural other', constructed in part to answer the needs for its expansionism. Ani explains that in European ideology the 'cultural other' is like the land, territory or space into which they expand themselves and describe their new awareness of objects, peoples and territories as their discovery... The conception of the 'cultural other' contributed to the survival of European culture, but simultaneously reduced the 'cultural other' to the status of a non-human, stripping away the characteristics of 'humanness:'"*

Questions of 'humanness' have been at the centre of oppressive systems as well as rights-based movements for decades, if not longer. And while European culture is responsible for a global 'othering' of non-European subjects, it is not the

only culture to do so. For instance, even an introductory confrontation with the caste system inherent to Hinduism's core philosophies (which do not fit neatly into the false dichotomy Weber's essay makes of 'western' vs 'animistic' worldviews) points to the ways in which the savarna or 'upper' castes have systemically dehumanised people from 'lower' castes as well as those from tribal (or indigenous) communities for millennia. A dehumanisation so complete that kinship, too, is disallowed, disavowed.

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This essay does not, unlike the one it is responding to, follow a linear train of thought, the model of traditional academic thinking that develops a thesis through sustained argument, subsections, rigour. Instead, I intend for it to meander from one thought to the next, one fragment to the next: Picking grass, plants, twigs and putting them together in the hopes of forming a durable home, a nest.

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Queer feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, in her work *Living a Feminist Life*, speaks in the introduction to the book about the citation policy that she follows in it: She does not cite any white men.

By 'white men', Ahmed clarifies, she is 'referring to an institution':

*"Instead, I cite those who have contributed to the intellectual genealogy of feminism and antiracism, including work that has been too quickly (in my view) cast aside or left behind, work that lays out other paths, paths we can call desire lines, created by not following the official paths laid out by disciplines. [...] Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before... Citations can be feminist bricks: They are*

*the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings.”*

I invoke Ahmed here because her understanding of the crucial role citation plays in granting authority, within academic and literary frameworks, to the analyses and reasoning arising from privileged social positions is completely relevant in regards to Weber's essay. Paul Kingsnorth, Richard Nelson, Boaventure de Sousa Santos, Gary Snyder: These are the names with which Weber's essay begins, an immediate solicitation to the institutions of white, male thinking—of which Weber, too, is a part.

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In an essay that aims to think through 'animistic' or non-western worldviews and ways of being, where are the names and the foundational thinking of indigenous writers, feminist poets, non-western scholars? When they do appear, why do they remain in the minority?

An exclusion is being enacted here in this essay as it lays down its foundational bricks of Latour, de Sousa Santos, Durkheim and other white male theorists while relegating most indigenous voices to much later chapters. Whose names and whose speech are present in the majority in this work, whose are missing? Who is kin, who remains other?

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To criticise the foundational bricks of Weber's text is not to deny value of thinking through Latour, de Sousa Santos, or Timothy Morton. But for an essay on decolonisation to deny primacy of place to the very voices and perspectives it frames as essential for a new mode of being is, to say the least, ironic.

Seen one way, a 'desire line'—which Ahmed mentions in her paragraph on citation—or a meandering path taken informally and outside the regulated, established one, can also be the

beginning of a new path: One created primarily with the aid of writers and thinkers outside the institutions of white academia. A path made by centring the non-human as well as the humans who have, as Weber notes in chapter two, been meted out ‘violent treatment’ under the colonialist ‘cognitive empire’ as ‘extra societal others (humans not adhering to societal norms, other peoples, other beings, other elements of the earth system).’

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I think a lot about the parts of the Delhi-specific birdsong that have remained an undifferentiated mass of sound for me through my life so far. The birds that I did not pay particular attention to because they, unlike the house sparrows, did not appear in my life at close range, were not pointed out to me by my grandmother. If, like the house sparrows, there are other birds that have disappeared from the landscape of this polluted, increasingly uninhabitable city, the absence of their song has gone by unnoticed for me. The lack has not, on a grey morning, cut cold.

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“A person is always related. A subject is always dependent on other subjects. A subject is always intersubjective. Subject means already to be ‘inter’ – to be a relational process itself,” writes Weber. And it is this intersubjectivity, the relational lines that connect us to each other—human person to human person, human person to sparrow person, sparrow person to tree person—that require urgent attention and care in the moment we are in.

The anti-CAA protests in India before the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect the country; the uprising in the United States against the murder of George Floyd, which has carried on in the midst of the pandemic: These social movements,



these voices, they are reminding us that to be a subject is to be dependent on other subjects; they are showing us that we do not, yet, see each other as equal, as kin. As such, I fundamentally disagree with Weber's claim that true decolonisation "needs to set forth from the self-liberation of those who exert violence". The privileging of the healing of the western subject over the emancipation of those who have been at the receiving end of this violence for centuries is not, to me, a decolonial approach. These are processes that must, at the very least, be enacted simultaneously.

As we move towards expanding our relationships with the non-human world, our relationships with the human, too, need tending, attending. In the framework of attending and attention this response has discussed: Citations are to be cited, names are to be named, speech is to be acknowledged as such, voices are to be listened to, kinships are to be made.

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Jenny Odell's quote on bird watching, cited earlier, carries on a little further, enacting an immediate kinship in how she connects learning about the speech of birds to a moment when she learned (recognised) something new about her own family:

*"The [bird] sounds have become so familiar to me that I no longer strain to identify them; they register instead like speech. This might sound familiar to anyone who has ever learned another (human) language as an adult. Indeed, the diversification of what was previously 'bird sounds'—into discrete sounds that mean something to me—is something I can only compare to the moment that I realised that my mom spoke three languages, not two."*

My own learning of the sparrows' tongue has been interrupted. Since those early lockdown weeks of their trying to build a home alongside my own, those two birds have flown.

Another life, with its own particular imperatives and leanings, disrupted their nesting: The neighbourhood cat, with its black, white and grizzled fur, began to rest in the shade of the balcony, too, endangering the safety of the space for the birds—which they were quick to take note of.

In the months since, I have still been looking out at the balcony and the skies when I am not working on my laptop and, in time, have come to identify by their feathers, size and colours so many of the kinds of birds that visit the space. Crows and pigeons, yes, but bulbuls too, babblers too, mynas too, koels too. Purple sunbirds, rose-ringed parakeets; once a kite, once a laughing dove. I have learned to recognise their particularities by sight (with some help from a couple of field guides to birds of northern India), but am still learning to listen to their speech so as to hear their individualities, recognise their wholeness.



## The power of many stories

The Power of Many Stories is a conceptual reflection reciprocating to Andreas Weber's invitation to think, explore and imagine together in a dialogical discourse that questions the Western Cognitive Empire and its impact on humanity. While upholding Weber's openness to embrace inclusion and to put into praxis indigenous worldviews and values, this reflection is mindful of how colonial and neo-colonial forces have hijacked, subjugated and diverted indigenous thought processes and worldviews from their natural path. Despite the existing dichotomy of humanity, this reflection elicits the idea that Western Cognitive Empire and Indigenous Worldview need to engage and eventually partner in a mutual process of self-decolonisation. By harnessing critical solidarity, the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples can make a paradigm shift to one that is reciprocal, shared, sincere, dignified and respectful. The Power of Many Stories is an ongoing dynamic that brings to public expression notions of 'shared language', 'self-decolonisation', and a 'shared ecology' where these multiple stories will be interwoven into a vibrant web that reflects the deeply interdependent, interconnected and interrelated nature of humanity.

### **A prelude – talking about talk**

The modern world, as we understand it, has for the most part been dominated and monopolised by a single narrative. Derived from one cultural worldview and as victors of war, the "European model" has sought to project itself as a representation of a "universalised language" and "sole possessor of all solutions to the challenges of our time"<sup>1</sup>.

The institutionalisation of this dominant worldview created and shaped power structures and systems such as the

“Westphalian World Order”,<sup>2</sup> globalism and militarism. This, in turn, perhaps made it possible to sustain what Andreas Weber calls the Western Cognitive Empire in his essay “Sharing Life. The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity”.

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Weber’s essay is an anti-thesis to the dominant narrative that questions the existing framework and value systems. It is an invitation to think and explore together in a dialogical discourse. He upholds the existence of the many ‘other’ narratives – particularly the indigenous worldview – and emphasises their value in engaging with the web of life. Whether this engagement will persuade the dominant narrative to reciprocate by undoing and decolonising itself through a journey of unlearning, rediscovery, understanding and healing is critical to this inquiry.

The broad conceptual outline that Weber presents demonstrates an openness to embrace inclusion, which is both refreshing and liberative. I wish to contribute to this dialogue by reciprocating to Weber’s invitation. By bringing multiples voices<sup>3</sup> that represent a spectrum of thought processes from Naga<sup>4</sup> society, my reflection seeks to explore notions of shared language, self-decolonisation, and a shared ecology. Somewhere along this process, I believe, the different perspectives engaged in this dialogue will criss-cross to form a spider’s web. Every strand is distinct and as important as the entire web itself. One is not complete without the other.

The indigenous worldview does offer an alternative to the dominant culture and particularly how power is organised. However, it needs to be acknowledged that forces of colonisation, subjugation, exploitation, repression and marginalisation have ensured that indigenous peoples, their worldviews, thought processes and patterns of social organisation are negated and diverted from their natural path. In most cases, they have been relegated to the past, which ensured that they did not evolve with each generation. This has effectively

caused them to be frozen in time.

Neichü Mayer, development consultant and author, laments how colonisation has changed the concepts of ecological balance<sup>5</sup>. She says human greed, aggression and manipulation has disturbed the fragile ecosystem. In fact, most indigenous peoples around the world will relate to the incisive observation of Nicholas Dirks where in post-1857 British India, “anthropology supplanted history as the principal colonial modality of knowledge and rule”<sup>6</sup>.

Colonial or Western anthropology continues to define the existence of present generations of indigenous peoples, their worldview, their aspirations, their culture and their sense of being. This anthropological lens has stifled the indigenous struggle for rehumanisation. It is absolutely essential not to romanticise, exoticify or make any cultural assumptions about any group of people.

For indigenous peoples to regain and rebuild all relationships they need to engage in a process of what the Kenyan scholar, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o called “Decolonising the Mind”<sup>7</sup>. Mayer calls for the recovery of indigenous stewardship, wisdom and experience to enable healing in their lands and restoration of its ecology<sup>8</sup>. This will include exploring a shared language. The Western Cognitive Empire and indigenous worldview need to realise their futures are intertwined, and that they need each other to decolonise and liberate themselves. By harnessing critical solidarity, they can chart a new discourse towards a shared ecology.

### **A shared language**

The pathway to a relational paradigm with ecological participation and sustainability needs engagement with the existing ‘language’ that governs human affairs and all of its relationships.

The present 'language' stemming from the Western Cognitive Empire is derived from a dominant culture, clothed in exclusive legal language. This discourse, by erasing the historical experiences of all other non-European cultures, ensured that values, ideas, thought-processes and aspirations that give meaning to indigenous peoples are missing from the 'language'. By selectively negating events, activities, processes and narratives of indigenous peoples, the dominant 'language' ensures that "Europeans are the only ones with the authority [...] and the solutions they find are said to have universal significance"<sup>9</sup>.

'Language', Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o says, is central to a people's definition in relation to the world. It serves as a means of communication and a carrier of an evolving culture<sup>10</sup>. 'Language' is the "collective memory bank" of a people's experience in history, and, hence, "the domination of a people's language by the language of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised"<sup>11</sup>. This in turn feeds the structures of oppression and policies of domination, exploitation and subjugation of others<sup>12</sup>.

Weber's "convergence of indigenous thinking and current ecological research" needs to consciously evolve in an interplay of a 'shared language' and 'self-decolonisation'. The link between language and decolonisation is lucidly revealed by Frantz Fanon. He reminds us:

*"Decolonisation never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men [and women], and with it a new language and a new humanity"*<sup>13</sup>.

The act of changing language is part of the process of changing the world,<sup>14</sup> and is crucial in recognising and developing a shared language. It invites humanity to a new way of perceiving and understanding the concrete conditions in which

dehumanisation prevails<sup>15</sup>.

208 This invitation must lead to a decolonising methodology where the indigenous worldview and Western Cognitive Mind engage in dialogue. And, eventually a pathway will emerge offering an evolving synthesis – ‘a shared language’. Such a process needs to respect indigenous peoples’ self-definition. Akhum David Longkumer, activist and researcher, asserts the world needs to “first learn to accept the reasoning of the indigenous people on their terms and not tinted by ossified thinking”<sup>16</sup>.

Nepuni Piku, Naga rights activist and farmer, who has been deeply engaged on indigenous peoples issues reminds us that, “The territories of the indigenous peoples today are the last remnants of humanity’s cultural and biodiversity realms”<sup>17</sup>. Longkumer points out that the indigenous peoples understand themselves as custodians of the commons. Their very existence, he adds, implies the feasibility of alternative ways of organising social and economic life that reproduce themselves without threatening the ecological balance<sup>18</sup>. Yet, it is also true that there is not one single unified indigenous perspective. In fact, even among the Nagas there exists a spectrum of viewpoints. Aheli Moitra, journalist and researcher, reminds us that a shared language “may work as a decolonising framework for ecological balance and sustainability” only when it incorporates and trusts the multiple voices and processes<sup>19</sup>. Such inclusions, she feels, will help keep power centres away from applying facile comparisons between different kinds of places and peoples which lead to untenable solutions<sup>20</sup>.

Creating a shared language is fundamental for self-decolonisation and rehumanisation through which the people can imagine and interweave the future of a shared ecology together. Arien Jamir, a young lawyer and artist, emphasises: “A shared language is essential for decolonization, but



decolonisation is a prerequisite in order to have that space to create a shared language<sup>21</sup>. It goes hand-in-hand, he says. Longkumer, meanwhile, amplifies that a shared language must be informed by the shared-lived realities and should be unafraid of emancipating the disadvantaged<sup>22</sup>.

In essence, a shared language evolves when a dialogue of worldviews appreciates and acknowledges the various knowledge systems and values required for building a shared ecology. It is a process where different worldviews learn from each other, and recognise they belong to a broader community of peoples.

### **Self-decolonisation and a shared ecology**

‘Self-decolonisation’ and a shared language’ are integral to a decolonising framework that enables a ‘shared ecology’. The ‘self’ in self-decolonisation brings to public expression the question of identity and self-definition and how it is being exercised in relation to others. Self-decolonisation, therefore, does not occur in isolation, but is a relational process with fellow human beings and nature.

Like most indigenous peoples, land for the Nagas is intimately inter-woven into their identity, culture, spirituality, freedom and way of life. “Our territories and forests are to us more than an economic resource. For us, they are life and have an integral and spiritual value for our communities. They are fundamental to our social, cultural, spiritual, economic and political survival as distinct peoples,”<sup>23</sup> Nepuni Piku reminds us. It involves human action to interact with the world through indigenous peoples’ collective wisdom, tradition, history and worldviews<sup>24</sup>.

Fundamentally, decolonisation means to be in relationship with the land by taking ownership with a “deep sense of stewardship”<sup>25</sup>. Eying Hümtoe, a theologian and educator,

affirms that a “decolonised framework is essential for ecological participation and sustainability” by “valuing all humans and dignifying all creatures”<sup>26</sup>.

210 Piku asserts that indigenous peoples are vital to the spectrum of the ecological biodiverse and not outside of it. He reminds us that ecological balance implies respecting a people’s unique way of life and allowing self-determination to flourish, free from acculturation and exploitation. He cautions against ignoring the dynamics of the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. “When we arrogate to control nature as a force within our control, we make the mistake of destabilise the equilibrium existence of ecology,”<sup>27</sup> Piku states. This, controlling nature, he says, is exhibited by the dominant western worldview.

How do Nagas and fellow indigenous communities engage the “colonial and neo-colonial influence of dominant institutions,”<sup>28</sup> which are impacting their lives and culture? While indigenous communities cannot go back to the past, they need to evolve by finding ways to recover and reconnect with the indigenous values, spirit and symbols of its new ‘self’.

Arien Jamir feels Nagas of the past could maintain ecological balance because their mental condition and value systems were different. He adds, “The idea of mass-manufacturing, profit making, ‘greed,’ conquest, seems to have been absent” and they lived in a more “natural world”<sup>29</sup>. Hence, decolonisation, Jamir senses, needs to be “restoration of values” and “rekindling relationship with nature”<sup>30</sup>.

The mutual processes of ‘self-decolonisation’ and a ‘shared language’ need to be a conscious praxis with an honest decolonised collaboration between the Western Empirical Empire and the world of indigenous peoples. It does not mean uniformity or preserving one or the other, but rather creating a new space in which different worldviews peacefully co-exist

and are respected<sup>31</sup>. Like an umbrella, Jamir explains.

The umbrella assumes the outline of an evolving 'shared ecology', which is foundational to achieving a 'shared humanity'. The entire ecological system is interconnected. It stems from the value that the earth's resources need to be co-shared equitably by sharing responsibility and standing in critical solidarity as stewards and partners in the commons.

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### **Conclusion – a reciprocal process**

For too long, the relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples have been undignified and lack respect. Andreas Weber's essay offers a way to engage, explore, critique, dialogue, imagine and to create a means of planting seeds of respect, sincerity and trust. In this context, respect implies a "reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct",<sup>32</sup> values and attitude in forming a shared ecology.

In the present novel coronavirus (COVID-19) world we have all been reduced to numbers and statistics. And yet, the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as the impetus for change of all humanity. It is providing an opportunity for self-examination, which can lead to new collective consciousness and serve as the common ground to become a unifier upon which our lives and relationships pivot. This present period is a good time to emancipate the language of exclusivity to one of inclusivity with complementary equitable participation.

It is with hope that this dialogical process will continue to reflect and dialogue across cultures and worldviews. After all, hope, even though challenging, is found only with fellow human beings in "an environment where our choices are self-defining and self-creating."<sup>33</sup> Eventually, hope as praxis needs to interweave the many stories into a web that is interdependent, interconnected and interrelated.

*“All peoples are descendants of the forest.  
When the forest dies, we die.  
We are given responsibility to maintain balance within the  
natural world. When any part is destroyed, all balance is cast  
into chaos.  
When the last tree is gone, and the last river is dead,  
then people will learn that we cannot eat gold or silver.  
To nurture the land is our obligation to our ancestors,  
who passed this to us for future generations.”*

**International Meeting of Indigenous and Other Forest-Dependent Peoples on the Management, Conservation and Sustainable Development of All Types of Forests at Leticia, Colombia, December 1996.**

1

Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., & London: James Curry Ltd., 1993, p. xvii.

2

Richard Falk says that the Westphalian World Order emerged as a result of the Peace Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which is the benchmark from which the modern system of sovereign states has emerged. In effect, "Westphalia," Falk says, "contains an inevitable degree of incoherence by combining the territorial/judicial logic of equality with the geopolitical/hegemonic logic of inequality." The Westphalian World Order was a "European regional system for most of its operative period, gradually developing a global outreach that attained its climax in the colonial era." It identifies with "state-centric, sovereignty-oriented territorially bounded global order" and "hierarchically structured world, shaped and managed by dominant or hegemonic political actors." Richard Falk. "Revisiting Westphalia, Discovering Post-Westphalia." *The Journal of Ethics*. ISSN 1382-4554, 2002, Vol. 6, Issue 4.

3

*"I requested six persons (3 women and 3 men) to respond to questions around shared language, decolonisation and indigenous ecological framework. These individuals are from diverse experiences and backgrounds with varied life experiences in Naga society. Their*

*responses are woven throughout this reflection."*

4

Transcending all colonial constructs, the Naga from a Naga perspective is a generic term for an indigenous community of "village-states" that is conscious of its collective political identity. While each "village-state" has its own language, culture, social and political system, they have, by way of historical, geographical and political forces evolved to consciously represent their "common public character" through an active self, namely, Naga. Akūm Longchari. *Self Determination: A Resource for JustPeace*. Dimapur, Nagaland: Heritage Publishing House, 2016. According to A.S. Shimray, the Nagas live in the present administrative state of Nagaland, the Naga Hills of Manipur, in North Cachar and Mikir Hills, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong in Assam, in the north-east of Arunachal Pradesh [Longding, Tirap and Changlang districts], in the Somra tracts and the Nagas in Burma who occupy areas from the Patkai range in the North to the Thaugthut State in the south, and from the Nagaland state border in the west to the Chindwin river (and beyond), in the east. A.S. Shimray. *Let Freedom Ring: Story of Naga Nationalism*. New Delhi: Promilla & Co., Publishers, 2005, pp. 30-31. The Naga people have been engaged in a political movement for self-determination. N.K. Das says that the Naga national movement is considered to be "one of the oldest unresolved armed conflicts in the world." He further

adds that, “the Nagas and many other tribes of north-east India claim that their territories did not form part of the lawful territory of India at the time of the transfer of power from the British crown.” N. K. Das. “Naga Peace Parleys: Sociological Reflections and a Plea for Pragmatism.” *Economic & Political Weekly*. Vol. XLVI, Issue 25, 2011, p. 70.

5  
*Neichü Mayer* is a Naga woman who is based in Israel with her family. She is a development consultant and author of the children’s book *Sitapaila* and is fascinated by the interaction between animals and children. *Neichü* responded to questions for this reflection on June 22, 2020.

6  
Nicholas B. Dirks. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2001.

7  
The phrase “Decolonising the Mind,” meaning and implication is inspired by the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. For details read, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., & London: James Curry Ltd., 1993.

8  
*Neichü Mayer* in her response to questions for this reflection on June 22, 2020.

9  
Marimba Ani. *YURUGU: An African-Centered Critique of European*

*Cultural Thought and Behaviour*. Trenton, NJ & Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994, 10th Edition 2000, p. 21.

10  
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., & London: James Curry Ltd., 1993, pp. 4-16.

11  
Ibid.

12  
Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: New Revised 20th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company 1970, Revised 1993, 2000.

13  
Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963, p. 36.

14  
Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1992, pp. 67-68.

15  
Aküm Longchari. *Self Determination: A Resource for JustPeace*. Dimapur, Nagaland: Heritage Publishing House, 2016, p. 116.

16  
*Akhum David Longkumer* is a Naga human rights activist and research scholar in the areas of development macroeconomics

and political economy in New Delhi, India. Akhum in his response to questions for this reflection on June 22, 2020.

17

*Nepuni Piku* has been involved in human rights and indigenous peoples' rights for more than 25 years. He was Secretary General of the Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights, and also served as Executive Secretary of International Alliance of Indigenous/Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forest (IAITPTF), London. Along with human rights work, Nepuni is a keen farmer who responded to questions for this reflection on June 21 and July 4, 2020. He is based in Dimapur, Nagaland.

18

*Akhum David Longkumer* in his response to questions for this reflection on June 22, 2020.

19

*Aheli Moitra* is a senior journalist and research scholar from Nagaland. She is currently pursuing a research study on Indigenous Religion(s) in Norway. Aheli in her response to questions for this reflection on June 22, 2020.

20

Ibid.

21

*Arien Jamir* is a practicing lawyer and also an artist. The youngest son of a first generation resident of Dimapur, Nagaland, Arien, composes caricatures of socio-political issues in Naga society for newspa-

pers and other publications. Arien in his response to questions for this reflection on July 5, 2020.

22

*Akhum David Longkumer* in his response to questions for this reflection on June 22, 2020.

23

*Nepuni Piku* in his response to questions for this reflection on June 21 and July 4, 2020.

24

The Morung Express Editorial of May 1, 2017, written by Aküm Longchari. "Self-Definition, Land & Culture". <https://morungexpress.com/self-definition-land-culture> (Last accessed on July 7, 2020).

25

Eying Hümtoe is a theologian and educator and the principal of Baptist Theological College, Pfütsero, Nagaland. She responded to questions for this reflection on July 5, 2020.

26

Ibid.

27

*Nepuni Piku* in his response to questions for this reflection on June 21 and July 4, 2020.

28

*Nepuni Piku* says, "From a primordial animism belief system to a contextualized Judeo Christian belief system, from a Morung way of community learning towards a modern standardized education system, from a multi-cropping self-reliant

*agro based economy system towards a more intensified monoculture cash crops plantation economy dependent consumerist culture.”*

All these, he says, “are taking place in the midst of the contestation of claims between the asserting indigenous Naga claims and imposition of governing structures over the indigenous institutions under the rule of the dominion state powers.” Piku in his response to questions for this reflection on June 21 and July 4, 2020.

29

*Arien Jamir* in his response to questions for this reflection on July 5, 2020.

30

Ibid.

31

Ibid.

32

Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London; New York: Zed Books; Dunedin, N.Z.: University of Otago Press; New York: Distributed in the USA exclusively by St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 120.

33

Ramin Jahanbegloo. *The Decline of Civilization: Why We Need to Return to Gandhi and Tagore*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2017, p. 110.





Kaustubh Deka

## Framing the indigene in a frontier in flux: Responses from Northeast India

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Framing the indigene in a frontier in flux:  
Responses from Northeast India

This engagement with Andreas Weber's essay, "Sharing Life: The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity", draws from observations made and experiences encountered by the author across communities of India's Northeast. Placing Weber's enunciations on the 'animistic worldviews' in the context of the region, this essay as an engagement with Weber goes on to muse on the ruptures and flows 'animistic cosmologies' in the 'eco-cultural landscape' of Northeast India, woven around the intimate interaction between nature, nation and nationalities. Built around three broad themes, which I call the testament of the rocks, the journey of the roads and the tales of the rivers, the essay interrogates whether there an 'indigene', already and always out there? How to understand the ways human society and the physical-natural environment constantly and dialectically shape each other over time? How can we place the idea of 'cosmology of animism' in the context of the 'lived experiences' of the people of Northeast India? From the examples of rock relics in geo-security terrains of Arunachal Pradesh to life-worlds in mountainous Naga villages enduring through changes and course shifting rivers in the Brahmaputra Valley, this essay emphasises that the continuous production of the region as a 'resource frontier' in the perilous slopes of capitalism needs to be factored in which would tell us that 'animistic worldviews' and ethos of reciprocity has a milieu that goes through a flux.

### **A mighty river, a burning gas well and a bunch of cats: My personal yard**

I began reading Andreas Weber's essay when the pandemic related to novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was

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gradually building up in our part of the world, the state of Assam in India's Northeast. By the time I finished reading it, besides the ever rising pandemic we were in the grip of few more catastrophes. The annual floods were heavier and more severe this time, the mighty Brahmaputra had been flowing well over the danger mark for the most of last two months and an unprecedented gas well blowout had occurred a few kilometres from my home town. The unrelenting fire keeps the sky in the night an eerie, fiery red, even as I type these words. Hundreds of families evacuated to 'temporary' camps, doubly devastated, being twice displaced, once by 'industry' and then by 'nature', continue to languish there. Furthermore, two of our cats, Kiki and Naomi have given birth to litters of seven kittens during this period, filling the house with a sense of joy and responsibility in the midst of a pandemic caused 'lockdown'. So in a way, Weber's essay arrived at a pertinent time. His emphasis to consider the outbreak as an ecological disaster, to take the world as a composite space based on fecundity and reciprocity between beings had a special resonance. My reflection on the ideas of the essay, the propositions it offers and the questions it raises, comes from my location and the times we inhabit. From where I'm located I looked at the essay as a treatise of a compelling ideal, a plot with which I could relate in most part and felt disjointed at some others. Thus, the following is my way of engaging with Andreas Weber's essay, in which I muse on the 'ecological story' of the region I come from, sharing glimpses into the intimate interaction between nature, nation and nationalities that makes up the region of Northeast India. Citing examples from my last many years' interactions with communities in the region, I will try to see how Weber's essay fits with the 'lived experiences' of the people of the region. Weber's emphasis on 'indigeneity' as emancipatory and animism being the 'cosmology of indigenous peoples – 'the most radical form to think and to enact reciprocity among beings' – pushed me to define my own 'sense' of these categories. After all, just recently Northeast India, our

region, had gone through a phase of intense social conflict and clash with the authorities around the pivotal issues of the rights of the 'indigenous'. Who then is an 'indigene' in my context? As the essay will elaborate further, in Northeast India today, being 'indigenous' has come to mean new ways of placing oneself in the world, and as such of pursuing a new type of politics (Karlsson, 2001). My response is built around few broad themes, such as, is there an 'indigene' out there and whether the trope of 'indigeneity' can be rescued from its instrumental use? How to understand the ways human society and the physical-natural environment constantly and dialectically shape each other over time? (Foster, 2009) Since we know that Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and wisdom are highly sensitive to the changing relationships between people and their ecological resource bases (Gadgil et al. 2000), what does the experience of Northeast India tell us? Finally, I would urge that the continuous production of the region as a 'resource frontier' standing in the perilous ruins of capitalism needs to be factored in, which would tell us that one's sense of 'animism' (which Weber refers to as 'the cosmology of indigenous peoples') is constantly negotiated and embedded into a site of production that can be meaningfully construed only as a site under flux. To elaborate on it further, I will use three broad themes, which I call the testament of the rocks, the journey of the roads and the tales of the rivers.

### **Northeast India: the disruptions of the cosmic oneness**

While the region of Northeast India comprises only 8 percent of the country's area, it makes up a fourth of India's forest cover. One useful way to approach this region is by treating it as an 'eco-cultural landscape', the total regional environment, composed of both natural and cultural elements. In such situations, conservation of natural resources amongst traditional societies arises out of their animistic

belief systems, which are fundamental aspects of people's culture, strongly conditioning use of natural resources. It is a worldview where with a sense of cosmic oneness, all entities are seen to share a fundamental bond, that connects them in their interaction with each other. In this sense of whole-some harmony of rocks and trees, the humans and animals, the living, the dead and ancestors are all one. What Weber calls as "the family of being(s)' – reciprocity among beings – human and nonhuman persons", is relatable here. It has been sufficiently agreed that the 'tribal' communities in the region practice an animistic faith, deriving their sustenance from a careful reverence towards forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. A sense of appreciation of the animal spirit, both mythical and mortal has been a recurring theme in the region. An excellent example can be found in the creation myth of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh, which talks about a lost civilisation of 'KajumKaja' where the whole of nature is presented in the being of a 'divine daughter'– "the green vegetation on the surface of the earth is the green-bordered skirt that she wears. Her silken white robe is transformed into clouds. The changes of the seasons are her appearance at different social occasions. The water and rain are her sweat and tears. Her melodious songs and music are transformed into the sweet voice soft birds and humming insects" (Dai, 2006:4). Another beautiful example of oneness with the natural world can be found with the Lepcha community of Sikkim, their primogenitors Tukbothing and Nazong-Nyu are said to have been created by God from the pristine snows of Mount Khangchendzonga's peak.

At this point, however, I will emphasise that to understand the travails and triumphs of the diverse people of this region in sustaining their 'indigenous life-worlds' one will have to engage first with the ways the region has been historically conceptualised and continues to be reproduced. A long history of colonial interventions followed by post-colonial conflicts has shaped up the very foundation of the region,

setting up the region as a resource frontier, as 'empty' or under-populated wilderness, which holds the promise for high rates of return on investment. An inevitable product of 'capitalist globalisation', when "capital actively seeks out and establishes new resource peripheries, thereby reproducing uneven development and marginalisation" (Barney, 2009:148). For this we need to understand the (yet unfolding) history of these frontier spaces invested in resource appropriation. The 19th century 'discovery' of oil, tea and coal in the eastern Himalayan foothills had a profound impact on the life in the region that endures the passages of time. With these 'discoveries', the region turned into one of the most important eastern frontier outposts of the British India empire. As the locals were seen as 'lazy natives' and the hill groups as 'wild tribes', indentured labourers from outside served as the foot soldiers for improving the empire's garden estates (Sharma 2011: 87). Like in other parts of the world, in the enterprise of colonialism the gun, the compass and the Bible moved together in Northeast India. Territories were mapped, people were subjugated and cultures were labelled. In the root of the ensuing political violence was an epistemic violence, beyond objectifying the 'geo-body' of the region, a cognitive dissonance was thus created with the image of the region portrayed as a land of witchcraft and magic, animism and wild tribes.

Weber's argument on the artificial schism that western cognitive produces by dividing the world into productive and wasteful can be traced to the experience of colonialism in Northeast India. It also meant a consolidation of the anthropocentric attitude where man was given the right to dominate and exploit the nature for his own needs, an essential part of the modernity and its empiricist and capitalist discourses. In the interest of colonialism, new reservation policies and structures were introduced in the region of Northeast India to restrain native access to valuable forests and to stimulate the clearance of fertile lands. Thus

the communities that had once enjoyed full access to land and forest became ensnared by a strangling dichotomy of restrictive forestry structures, policies and processes, and the rising livelihood demands of an expanding population well into the post-colonial times (Vandekerckhove & Suykens 2008: 450–451). This foundational reality of the region has come to become the conditioning factor not only of the various state-society and inter-community interactions in the region but also of the ways people began to make sense of their natural surroundings. In other words, it was a rupture into the cosmic oneness, a split of the ‘spirit worlds’, where all entities of past and present, living-dead, human-non-human were considered bound together. It was the onset of a particular discourse of ‘development’ where the region was (and continues to be) construed through overlapping binaries of ‘settled’ and ‘wild zones’, the latter demarcated for resource exploitation.

What does this kind of ‘intervention’ do to a people and how much does these disruptions endure?

My ethnographic experiences of the region present a rather complex picture where due to the radical commodification of the land and the resources over the years the indigenous populace cannot anymore have a meaningful interaction with their resources (Karlsson, 2011). Most importantly, consequent to the making of the region into a ‘resource frontier’ there has been a powerful emergence of social classes in the region, which exists and thrives by exploiting this ‘new’ equation between nature and ‘development.’ As I will discuss below, it becomes difficult at times to separate the tropes of indigeneity in the region from the complex machinations of such exploitations.

### **The testament of the rocks: From ally to victim**

A telling example of the complex influence of a modern

'penetrative' state onto people's social memory is that of Membas, a small Buddhist community that lives in Tibet as well as the Menchukha Valley nestled along the Yargapb-chu river in Arunachal Pradesh of India. The Membas consider a particular stone formation by the river, on the way to Dorjeeling village as a sacred relic, which they believe, is installed by their ancestral deities there and which with full accuracy depict the entire topographical design of the Memba habitat, spanning across the 'men made' international border. This traditional belief seems to have received a boost, after Indian military pilots apparently 'confirmed' the same, comparing the stone shape with their aerial maps of the region. This 'fact' was told to me by almost everyone with lot of pride and satisfaction, whenever the topic of the stone relic was raised. This response was contrasting with the matter of another sacred spot, a waterfall and a cave by its side, which the Membas consider holy as they believe it to be a spot where the great Buddhist master Guru Rinpoche once meditated. However, once the region became a prime zone of military troop movement, the spot was 'discovered' as one where founder of Sikhism Guru Nanak meditated on his way to Tibet. An installation mentioning the same has been put up since then and tourists crowd around it to take photos. A Gurudwara (the Sikh place of worship and assembly) has been constructed too and it was only after some local resentment that the construction was erected across the road. Understandably, the overwhelming presence of the military and the fact that it has become one of the mainstay of local income generations, resentments against such 'cultural' encroachment has been limited and self-contained. It also gives rise to the question, can geo-politics displace the traditional knowledge systems as well as disrupt the animist cosmologies?

Moving few states across, in many Naga villages tales are abound as how the various rocks of the villages took shape of 'giants' of different sizes and stood up with the villagers



to face invaders from 'outside'. Every rock thus has a being, with distinct 'individual' name and connected to the social memory of a people – something difficult to fathom through the lens of development based on 'infrastructure'. One thus needs to understand how the cultures that used to consider the rocks as active part of their social life-worlds have aggressively turned into 'extractive' development, being a 'contractor' becoming one of the most lucrative job opportunity for the young generations.

While finalising this essay, I received a video sent on my phone from a friend from Arunachal Pradesh. It was of a traditional dance performed by the youth of the Adi community on the day of paddy plantation. There was a sense of elation and fulfillment about it, of men fulfilling an ancient pact with nature. Reminiscing on another such soothing occasion, once on a walk in Mima village, Nagaland I came across framers engaged in paddy plantation, in fields under the shadow of the mountains and dotted with stone monoliths marking 'feast of merit': A Naga cultural tradition dating to pre-Christian times when the social status of a person was assessed by how much he gives to the needy. A custom that marked the spirit of generosity and compassion that were at the core of the 'indigeneity' defining these communities. This resonates with what Weber says in his essay, 'generosity is simultaneously a moral and a material imperative'.

How far can such bonds be maintained? In the logic of 'extractive capitalism', will the dictates of 'profitable' alternative ventures overpower such traditional practices? 'Science' has now confirmed the ecological benefits of traditional agricultural methods, including the 'slash and burn method' ('swidden'/ shifting cultivation) of the hill tribes. Adi people identify nine types of soils and plant crops according to the properties of the soil. "Their knowledge is far more nuanced because their concern appears to be not just the field they cultivate, but also the surroundings," a report observes.<sup>2</sup>

However, the official state position continues to vilify and discourage these methods. Instead, potentially pernicious 'cash crops' alien to the region like Oil Palm has been vigorously promoted. This has been done fundamentally from the point of view of 'profitability', discarding the potential harm to the bio-diversity and most importantly the disruption to the traditional nature-human connect that it will bring in these areas. Consider here also the fact that many communities of the region follow the practice of maintaining a 'sacred grove', a small patch of the natural ecosystem that traditionally serves as an area of religious rituals, symbolic of nature-human interconnections. Concerning reports are coming out about sacred groves being threatened and destroyed by projects of infrastructural expansion.

### **A generation that is moving out: Some roads taken, some not**

What I'm trying to emphasise on is that the 'indigene' in practice is not an abstract and timeless entity but is produced through constant negotiations. One important way to capture these tensions is to look at the rising trend of the outmigration of the young people from the regions like Northeast India to various urban pockets of Indian 'mainland', a trend that has been advancing in recent years. This migration is both aspiration and conflict driven. The younger generation is evidently moving out from their traditional life-worlds, where the village used to be 'a Universe in a nutshell'. This takes me to one evening in Karbi village of central Assam some years back and what I had noted down then:

"Evening comes fast here but it gongs of celebration, of food, of music and of course of storytelling! Perhaps, it is the endless rounds of Hurlong (traditional rice millet beer) with smoked pork steaks that weave the perfect ambience. Sitting by the fireplace, with the soft sound of fermenting Hurlong dripping from one pot to another, Samson punu

(uncle) takes us back to the ancient age with ease and with conviction. What fascinate me are the astonishing sense of continuity and a deep sense of association with the stories! The rock on which the giant eagle attacked the first Karbi hero Teron, happens to be the huge granite rock that we passed by on our way to Bisikri (the sacred lake), and when God created the first Man and Woman from the soil of the hills, it is that Sinhasan peak that God used, the one we can see faintly in the far under the moonlight. Punu's folk-tales one after another makes me believe that life and death is a simple narration, repetition of an ancient cycle but coloured by generations after generations."

As the world outside crumbles down and goes through a whirlwind of change, the villagers are holding on tight. But cracks in these 'idyllic' worlds are visible already and they are deepening. Young boys are taking the long road out of their villages. They are defecting, sometime from the traditional occupations and sometimes from the places altogether, not willing to continue what they feel is a harsh life. The dilemmas confronting the Karbis of Assam are relatable to that of the Brokpas (also known as 'Drokpa) of Arunachal Pradesh. The words of Norbu, a septuagenarian Brokpaherder from high altitude West Kameng captures this tragedy well: "But, then, if you stop the annual migration the Brokpa has been known to practice since ages, you lose the essence of your identity. If you opt for a settled, sedentary life, you are no longer a Brokpa."<sup>3</sup> Can they find their way back? Is there a road to and from indigeneity?

### **The rivers were alive, once**

Rivers have always held sacred spaces in the traditional cosmology of the region. Life in the Brahmaputra Valley revolves around the river. And both in moments of love and lamentations the mighty river or one of its many tributaries are always present. The different names other than Brahmaputra

by which the river is referred to by the different communities who lives in its embrace – Burlung-Buthur by Bodo), Di Lao by Dimasa, Ti-lao by Tai, LuiTo by Deuri, Luit Aroi by Karbi, Abung by Mising, Dhapaci by Rabha, Ammawari by Garo, Leuti by Tiwa and so on –resonate a deep rooted reverence and attachment with it and exhibit a pluralistic ethos that has historically defined the region. However increasingly there have been attempts at controlling the rivers for hydro-electric power generation. Structures of dams and mega embankments have been raised and more are proposed that amounts to a gross simplification and reduction of the social and natural world to a distorted geophysics, disrupting the ways societies used to interact with the rivers and vice versa. As mountain rivers are drying up in many places, due to these ‘developmental interventions’, and downstream rivers are frequently shifting course, causing substantial damage, what is facing extinction is the traditional cosmologies around the river where water usage and sustainability was at the core. I often enjoy watching the fishermen cook a slow meal by the river in their day out, the river being their protective deity and a nurturing mother; it is like watching children playing at the bosom of their mothers. Increasingly such scenes are depleting though with callous acts like setting up of industrial mega plants right next to the rivers and subsequent release of the industrial wastes onto them, thus making them unsuitable for the fisher-folks.

### **An emergent ‘elite’: When ‘spirit brothers’ became preys**

In one of my first visits to the Dzukou Valley of Nagaland, famous for its unique landscape and flora and fauna, I had encountered a hunting party composed of presumably respectable officials proudly displaying their spoils. Let us remember here that for many tribes of Northeast India, most prominently the various Naga and Mizo tribes, animals like tigers have been considered as ‘spirit brother’, the soul of the men

residing in the tigers in the forest. 'Folk-tales' and creation myths suggest that men and tigers were once blood brothers. In fact, a beautiful representation of this quintessential balance between all elements can be found in the Mao Naga myth according to which Tiger, Spirit and Man were three brothers who came into existence through a union between the first woman and the clouds of the sky<sup>4</sup>. In a similar vein, in their traditional belief the Angami Nagas call the supreme creator as 'U-kepenuopfü' which translates into 'female one who gave birth to us'. True to all shamanic cultures, in the societies of Northeast India too, traditionally the relation between the hunter and the hunted was not a lineal one but one of reciprocity and divine respect. What happened then, that from a position of reciprocity animals came to be seen as coveted preys, more than anything else? Here one would need to understand and engage with the years of trauma accumulated in the region due to the prevalence of conflicts of various kinds, mostly around one's assertion of socio-cultural-political identities and territorial rights. Unleashing vicious cycles of violence, these conflicts emanating from groups against the state as well of communities against each other have led to a deep militarisation of the region, a fetishisation of 'gun culture' and the emergence of a new 'elite' disrupted from the traditional ethos of life. Consequently, even in the indigenous communities where once all living beings were considered as part of one big family, wanton acts of hunting became commonplace, being increasingly considered as a matter of 'pride', a marker of triumphant 'masculinity'. More perturbing is the examples like that of Manas National Park in Bodoland in Assam where despite the rhinoceros being considered sacred in the Bodo cosmology, in the peak of the Bodo insurgency against the Indian State in the 1990s, one-horned rhinoceros were extensively hunted by the militants who considered it upholding their 'indigenous national rights', which included their rights over the land and all its resources. The lucrative international bio-piracy of rhinoceros made the animals highly profitable for the militants, the rhinoceros

coming to be considered only as instruments to something else, their organic connection to the community obliterated.

Thus, one cannot ignore these complex 'developments' taking place in the 'lived experiences' of the indigenous, while discussing changing tenors of Animism in these contexts. Besides these critical negotiations with power structures of various kinds, due to the influences of the market economy and modern communications, the communities themselves are becoming more heterogeneous, which also challenges the 'tribal ethics of land relations' (Soreide and Gloppen, 2019:2). What the experience from the Northeast tells us is the need to be cautious against taking the 'indigenous' as some entity that is timeless or 'pure'. At times, supporting 'indigenous' rights claims might mean the dilemma of having to support a 'sedentarist metaphysic' that legitimises a sort of 'hierarchy of belonging', which can translate into exclusion and violence against 'migrant' and other 'non-indigenous' communities (Li, 2002: 362). In such situations, one can surmise that the claims to indignity and the continuing assertions of indigenous rights needs to be placed in the context of continuing articulations of the communities' traditional knowledge and the animistic cosmology. Andreas Weber asks to take his essay as a question, not as an answer. So I also leave my own question at the end, is there an 'indigene' out there and if so, can we rescue her? How to salvage the 'traditional', or if needed, 'reinvent' it?

### **Conclusion: Hope comes from a tree house for the birds**

In all the examples cited in this essay, nature was seen as an ally of the indigenous people, a kindred spirit that guard against adversaries. And yet in changed circumstances, it has come to be seen as the adversary, an 'object' itself, to be tamed, controlled and profited from. True, Northeast India is a land of 'indigenous' communities that consider

nature as part of their very selves but undeniably it is also a theatre stage of “an urban transformation that has followed a counter-intuitive path, influenced by the socially disruptive capacities of capital, calamities and counter-insurgency” (Barbora, 2017). The fact is that historically the nature of interaction of the indigenous communities with the state has been premised on the ecological niches and the livelihood patterns that prevailed among them. Again a good example here would be the historical expansion of the colonial state into India’s Northeast where the incursion of the ‘modernist’, revenue seeking state system was resisted by the various indigenous communities as they felt their relational sense of ecology was being disrupted by this newly imposed system of authority. In another sense, this development was related to what Arturo Escobar calls a crisis of nature’s identity itself, as he points out that the meaning of ‘nature’ shifts throughout history according to cultural, socio-economic and political factors. These shifts subsequently change the indigenous life-worlds. I’m raising this point here to stress on the importance of engaging with the making of India’s Northeast as a resource frontier raised on a framework of extractive industrial regime. Anna Tsing’s insightful ethnographic works in Kalimantan, Borneo Island of Indonesia is helpful in conceptualising the ‘frontier’ when she describes: “Frontier landscapes are particularly active: Hills are flooding away, streams are stuck in mud, vines swarm over fresh stumps, ants and humans are on the move. On the frontier, nature goes wild. Where making, saving, and destroying resources are utterly mixed up, where zones of conservation, production, and resource sacrifice overlap almost fully, and canonical time frames of nature’s study, use, and preservation are reversed, conflated, and confused.”<sup>5</sup> Such frontiers do not recognise indigenous knowledge as well as systems of communal property and other local customs. Tsing calls these unfolding global phenomena as “the tragedy of the commons”. On the one hand, the ‘local’ gets stamped, circulated, and reproduced as pristine and mystical and on

the other, it turns into a frontier landscape of struggle over natural resources. This struggle takes place primarily through the points of contact between various actors of the global and local maps.<sup>6</sup>

In such a scenario, where does hope lie? Is Weber's appeal a lost call then – the one where he invited “all who are living in worlds which are shared between human and nonhuman persons to chime in, walk hand in hand under a tree, where relations are not analysed, but felt, and made”? After all, it is a most important appeal the validity of which the traditional life moorings of the indigenous societies of Northeast India has always confirmed. Animism, more than anything else, is about a sense of empathy. And empathy is what we need now, as a people, as a species, as a planet, more than ever before. Although the cosmology of animism is integral to the life-worlds of Northeast India, in practice its concrete manifestations have differed across time and space. The challenge will be to situate the essence of it amidst all the ruptures and chaos that have been sweeping through these indigenous societies. For this, I believe, one will have to think of animism primarily as a conversation or a dialogue with one's environment or nature. And in this dialogue, the issue, as Nurit Bird-David points out, is “one of authority – whether authority is given to relational ways of knowing (how, where, when, how much, by whom, etc.) in particular cultures/ times/ places”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, talking about Animism and indigenous cosmologies in contexts such as Northeast India inevitably takes me to the realms of eco-politics, “ultimately about who is entitled to what, who owes what to whom, how such rights and entitlements are to be enforced, and who gets to decide” (Kathleen McAfee, *The Politics of Nature in the Anthropocene*, 2016).

I come back to my little town by the mighty river and find some hope. On a walk by the Brahmaputra on twilight, I noticed that some compassionate person has built a series



of wooden tree houses for little birds to take shelter, drink water. We have always heard from our grandmothers, tales of the birds being our kith and kin, once sharing a common tongue. Getting to know that this particular initiative was undertaken by a person with a violent past of a 'militant', makes me think that the 'indigene' can definitely be recovered, 're-invented' too if needed. The COVID-19 pandemic has also given rise and strengthened new bonds in the town. Young people across communities and classes are increasingly coming together to take care of the many homeless 'animals', sharing duties and responsibilities in this regard. Our cats have become foster mothers to many an orphaned kitten rescued and our oldest male cat, to our delight, has almost become a foster grandpa, playing and 'training' the little ones. The animal companions, like always, helped us make a better sense of the world in these otherwise confusing and gloomy times. All these, perhaps, have been experiences of what Weber calls as moments of 'deep communication'. The spirit brothers (and sisters!) can meet after all!

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A detailed discussion of this phase of conflict which was around the issue of passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 can be found here : <https://in.boell.org/en/2019/12/20/we-will-give-blood-not-our-land-citizenship-amendment-act-protests-context-northeast>

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## River, rituals and communities

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Deification of river Kopili in Assam is one example of how reverence for nature is actuated by deification of elements by indigenous communities, which happens through a process of narrativisation in forms of myths, legends and rituals, and perpetuated in the society. Every year, ritualistic performance is carried out in honour of the Kopili river. Though river worship is not unknown across cultures, worshipping of the Kopili finds significance in the fact that it is carried out by three different indigenous groups professing different culture and faith, speaking different languages. There are, however, formal variances in the rituals performed in these three different groups. This article wants to contribute towards understanding the implications of such perspectives in the contemporary extractive economic regime and territorialised identity politics in the Northeast region of India.

River worship is a phenomenon witnessed across cultures around the world, particularly among the indigenous communities. It is also witnessed among the practitioners of major religions. For example, in Hinduism one notices deification of rivers like the Ganges, Saraswati and Brahmaputra, which are conceived in anthropomorphic forms, and are part of the Hindu pantheon. All the major sects of Hinduism attach sacredness to these rivers. In that sense, animism forms the core of every religions as rightly claimed by E B Taylor. However, attribution of sacredness to such natural bodies like river, rocks and hills in major religions are not as similar to that of nature worshipping among the indigenous peoples. In organised religions, particularly the Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic religious tradition, human is placed in a unique position in relation to other living creatures and unanimated entities. This superiority of human over other beings is based

on consciousness and rationality. The advent of evolution theory further strengthened this idea, which was applied in the structure and functioning of brains leading to its hierarchical classification of neo-cortical, cortical, reptilian and limbic. George E Tinker, an American Indian scholar aptly opines how understanding of consciousness is segmented and inadequate despite advances in modern science. This problem is rooted in the western-modern rationalist tradition of anthropocentric ideas of the world.

On the other hand, the indigenous worldview is contrary to the western-scientific tradition. The indigenous worldview emphasises relatedness of the world in equal terms between all beings – both animate and inanimate. In this sense, living beings are not separate from nature, but parts of the complete whole. There is a sense of mutuality and interdependence in this. If language is a medium of cognitive construction of the world, it is a key to understanding such mutuality and relatedness. For instance, in Dimasa language, forest/ jungle is known as hagra, meaning 'land that's elderly' (ha = land; gra = old/ elder/ aged). Thus forest/ jungle is not a wild space, but home to disparate members of floral and faunal families and a resourceful provider as the community of elders in knowledge and wisdom. Their symbiotic relationship with and knowledge on forest is manifested in its classification depending on its nature, i.e. hagrama, hagra, hagrama and so on. For all the provisions accrued from the forest is returned in reverence.

The bio-cultural ethics of resource extraction of indigenous societies are the product of this reverence. One not only restricts over extraction, but also protect and nurture as is visible in case of sacred grooves across the indigenous societies. The Khasi-Jaintia sacred grooves is well known and there are several seminal works on it. It has remained a major point of tourist attraction for years in the state of Meghalaya. The Dimasa traditional religion and its institutionalisation

through the system of 'daikho' is also based on idea of sacred forest. Shrines of each daikho are located at areas rich in bio-diversity and extractive activities in such areas are restricted. Such perspectives towards forest and other natural beings brings forth the sense of mutuality that is missing in the western rationality that visualises the world in binary lens of human and animal, man and nature, and living and non-living. Whereas in non-western societies, one can go on adding in the list of revered beings from hills, forests, rocks, rivers, streams, falls to individual plant and animal species. This idea of reverence for nature is actuated by deification of elements, which happens through a process narrativisation in forms of myths, legends and rituals, and perpetuated in the society.

Deification of the Kopili river in Assam is one such example. Every year, ritualistic performance is carried out in its honour. As stated above, though river worship is not unknown across cultures, worshipping of the Kopili finds significance in the fact that it is carried out by three different indigenous groups professing different culture and faith, speaking different languages. There is, however, formal variances in the rituals performed in these three different groups, though it is outside the scope of this discussion, which will be directed mainly towards understanding the implications of such perspectives in the contemporary extractive economic regime and territorialised identity politics in the region.

The Kopili originates at the border of Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya flowing into Assam where it courses down through the districts of Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong (West) in the hills section. In the plains it runs through Hojai, Nagaon and Morigaon districts before draining into the Brahmaputra. With a travelling distance of 290 km, it is the largest tributary of the Brahmaputra in the southern bank. In the hill districts, three major indigenous communities of Jaintia, Karbi and Dimasa inhabit the bank of the Kopili.



All these three communities worship the Kopili. According to Jaintia tradition, their ancestors crossed this river on their way to present habitat in the hills. They consider the river as mother Goddess and every year sacrificial rituals are performed for its propitiation. They do not dare to cross the river without performing certain sacrifices to the Goddess and strongly believe that any violation would incur curse from the Goddess. Similarly, the river is seen to be propitiated among the Dimasas and Karbis. The major difference in the ritualistic form of the Karbi-Dimasa to that of Jaintia is that in the former sacrificial ritual is not communal, but individual or familial. This does not mean that members in the community do not take part in ritual, and propitiation is carried out for wellbeing of particular individual or a family. Such propitiation takes place at two levels, i. voluntary and ii. curative. In the former any individual or head of a family may personally commit to carry out propitiation ritual at the end of the season for personal or familial wellbeing in the form of good harvest, general health and job or educational prospects. On the other hand, divination is involved in the curative form. For instance, divination for curing illness of a member in a family, caused by the wrath of the river deity for some ill action on behalf of the victim.

Such beliefs as illness caused by the wrath of a river and propitiations through sacrificial performance for pleasing/ appeasing it, seem superstitious in Western rationalist epistemology which is premised on empirical evidence and scientific validation of the same. But it is seldom realised that traditional knowledge is derived from observations that involves variables of time and matters often more than the modern science. Modern science laboratory represents the Western reductionism the best in this context – the natural space reduced to a smaller and controlled space.

However, the common sense knowledge holds rivers as the life line of societies, civilisations, other floral and faunal

species, and what is broadly termed natural ecosystem. River carries nutrients with silts and nourishes vegetations of its valleys – domesticated or wild. With their intimate knowledge over local ecosystems, human societies have tapped river waters and build social institutions. The Ahom system of hydraulic management, traditional ‘dong’ irrigation system among the Dimasa and Bodos are a few examples of many from this region. Such local interventions are totally different from the modern mega structures that disturbs the natural flow of the river and inundates large areas destroying biomes with unfathomable ecological reactions. Traditionally, still at the end of the harvests, rituals as promised is performed in return of the generosity showed by the river. Material replenishments by the river, thus also serves as occasion of reaffirming community bonding with the ceremonial feasts that follows the rituals.

The Karbi-Dimasa ritual provide some interesting pointers. Among the Dimasas, language used in chanting of hymns during propitiation is optional. The hymns are chanted either in Dimasa language with last few chants in Karbi language or completely in Karbi language depending on the language skill of the priest concerned. The reason for this being that the ritual for the Kopili river God was borrowed from the Karbis. There are also instances of priests from one community performing the ritual in the other. It may be noted here that the Kopili as a river God does not form a part of Dimasa pantheon in general. It is propitiated only by the section of Dimasas inhabiting the river valley.

Another point of interest is the river name itself that unfolds a history of ethnic relationship. The present river name Kopili derives from the Jaintia term of Ka Kupli who is worshipped as the mother goddess. Kopili is the commonly known name across the state. This river, however, has a different name among the Karbi-Dimasa community as Langklang. Lang is a Karbi word for water. The Dimasa word for water is ‘di’, which

is prefixed in most of the river names in Assam, i.e. Dihing, Dibang, Dikhou and Dibru. This indicates that Dimasas inhabited these river banks once upon a time. Similarly, the river name Langklang, as prefixed by 'lang' indicates that Karbis must have inhabited the valley before the Dimasas. But the Karbis nowadays are seen to be widely using the name Kopili, as mentioned above, which is a corruption of Kupli. On the other hand, Langklang which is a Karbi name, is generally used by the Dimasas.

The above discussion brings forth certain elements for understanding the past with contemporary implications. The indigenous communities are mostly pre-literate and therefore oral in social transactions. Social memories of these oral communities are, therefore, mainly a ritualised memory. The changing nomenclature of the river and prevalence of the ritual practices amongst the three communities, though different in forms, thus provide us with keys to understanding peopling of the region and subsequent cultural interactions. The Karbis might have come under the political influence of the Jaintias and thereby adopting the Jaintia name of the river by giving up their own. Alternatively, the Jaintia name might have been adopted by the Ahoms, which later percolated to the Karbis. In any case, the Dimasas continued with the Karbi name. Similarly, worshipping of the river by the three different communities indicate cultural fluidity of the time. This fluidity changed with the colonialism. The colonial governmentality solidified the fluid ethnic boundary. In the post-colonial times the ethnic identities increasingly sharpened leading to the violent clashes in some cases. In October, 2005, two buses were burnt down and 38 passengers belonging to the Karbi community were hacked allegedly by a group of Dimasa militants. Sadly, it happened over a competing/ contested claim on territory at the bank of this same river.

The reverential submission of these three riparian indigenous

244 communities to the river and its nomenclature laced with the history of migration, settlement and cultural exchange also directs one towards alternatives from the existing and dominant political discourse of territorialised identity and resource extractive regime. In lieu of the existing propensity for ethnicisation of spaces, ecological zoning of spaces would accrue larger benefit in multiple ways. The existing riparian cultural fluidity among these three ethnic communities is conditioned by ecology. This fluidity may be extended towards creating of an economy of sustainable niche market of local natural product. There is an immense scope of extending such local ecologically niche natural markets over this entire north eastern region.

River, rituals and communities

The ritual performance of the river Kopili stands for the reverence for natural entities in the indigenous worldview. Such reverence emanates from the idea of inter-relatedness of beings with a sense of mutuality. This is on the contrary to anthropocentric perspectives of the western-scientific epistemology that places human kind above all beings, including nature, and paying the price for the same. The developmental paradigm rooted in this anthropocentrism, however, is routing the local ecological knowledges along with its concomitant ritualistic memories. Rapid urbanisation and modern education system are the vanguard of this epistemicide of traditional knowledge, which is dismissed as irrational and superstitious. The universalisation of western rational science has either marginalised or routed other forms of knowledge. The dominance of western scientific tradition over the forms of traditional knowledge comes from its self-proclaimed superiority based on its centuries of political and economic dominance. Thus, practice of science is not value neutral as the science itself.

Uttam Bathari

Ills brought about by the river, believed by the three indigenous as discussed in this article, are manifestation of disturbed nature's fury. Increase in transmission of zoonotic

vectors in recent times only reaffirm that humankind has trespassed and violated forbidden hinterland of nature, the habitat of spirits as the indigenous communities believe. Decolonisation of western epistemology is the only course reversal in this regard.

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Ash Narain Roy

## Revisiting indigenous epistemologies of North East India

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This article has a dual focus. It seeks to revisit the epistemology of the indigenous people in the Northeast but it also examines this issue in the context of Andreas Weber's eclectic and profoundly insightful essay, which echoes the worldviews and cosmo-ecological thoughts of the various communities of the region. Like the indigenous people around the world, the storytelling tradition and ecologically sustainable practices have kept the people of the Northeast of India strongly connected to their land as also to their ontology and epistemology. The Northeast is a diverse mosaic of ethnicities and cultures and the various indigenous groups have preserved traditional knowledge through oral narratives, cosmological observations, and cultural and ritual practices. This knowledge has been passed on to generations through storytelling, both literal and metaphorical, song and dance as well as rituals.

Weber describes animism as the “cosmology of the indigenous people”. While animism is widely prevalent in the North East, there are huge diversities in terms of the region's deities, oral traditions, rituals and festivals, environmental ethics, sustainable agricultural practices and their taboos about certain plants and animals. Weber's perspectives and insights about aliveness, ecopolitics and rules for behaving well in the society of being are very edifying but they also raise many questions. A whole new range of vocabularies and narratives for the Anthropocene epoch that Weber uses in his essay is still evolving. All the same, by not over-emphasising the solution, the essay doesn't lose the sense of the narrative, even the reflexivity of the narrative.

*"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound together with mine, let us walk together."*

**Lilla Watson, Indigenous Australian visual artist, activist and academic**

Living in harmony with nature has been an integral part of the culture, traditions and lifestyles of most indigenous people across the world. Their traditional practices, religious beliefs, rituals, folklore, arts and crafts lead to harmonious inter-relationships among nature, ecology and cosmos. Such a lifestyle sheds light not only on the knowledge systems of the indigenous people but also on their cosmology, ontology and epistemology.

A large body of work on the indigenous people in Northeast India is primarily anthropological. Their cosmology and epistemology have not been sufficiently theorised, articulated and documented the way; for example, it has been done in the case of South American 'pueblos originarios' (natives, indigenous; in Spanish pueblos means village, originarios means original). The mythologies, stories, songs, rituals and cultural practices are often treated as mere ethnological data and treated as residuary and unscientific.

J B Fuller, chief commissioner of Assam, wrote in 1909 that "Assam at the far northeastern corner of India is a museum of nationalities". B G Verghese described the Northeastern region as "another India, the most diverse part of a most diverse country, very different, relatively little known and certainly not too well understood". The Northeast is a mosaic of diverse ethnicities, cultural forms and environmentally and life sustaining practices.

The local communities possess intangible cultural wealth and immense collective moral and cultural capital. To the people, forests, mountains and rivers are a repository of

traditional knowledge and wisdom. Sadly, the so-called main-stream has exiled the local people to the fringes of conversations thereby perpetuating the stereotype of the native with no agency.

For thousands of years, the indigenous people have followed a lifestyle and cultural practices, which emphasise what social scientist Shiv Viswanathan calls “everydayness of coping”. Doing more with less is built in their way of surviving on the minimum. This “ethnography of coping”, says Vishwanathan, is a “lesson to us all”. Their life provides us with a compass of everyday knowledge and how the margins survive and safeguard their knowledge systems. A related aspect of such a philosophy, worldview and lifestyle has been a sense of the collective.

Capitalism is a great promoter of individual rights – the right to own, to sell and to keep. The indigenous people, on the contrary, believe in and practice a model that subjugates the rights of the individual to those of peoples, communities and nature. Rather than a source of sustenance, nature is treated by capitalism as a resource to be exploited for profit. The capitalistic developmental model is essentially extractivist. The minerals and other resources are located in the regions where the indigenous communities live. The extraction of these minerals leads to the destruction of local ecology and the ouster and displacement of the indigenous communities. The essence of such a philosophy is that the wellbeing can occur only in a community. The wellbeing is a built-in culturally specific idea of a community living in harmony with nature. In the worldviews of a large number of indigenous people across the world, the central idea, which underpins the meaning of ‘wellbeing’ is the balanced relationship between people and their community and natural surroundings. Real wellbeing is in harmonious co-existence. It is not income-dependent but promotion of people’s livelihood and environment. Buen Vivir and Ubuntu share similar visions.

Buen Vivir, the cosmovision of the Quechua people of the Andes in South America, emphasises that ‘good living’ is not about individual, but the individual in the social context of their community and in a harmonious environmental situation. The essence of Ubuntu too is ‘I am, because you are’. In other words, we are all connected and that one can only grow and progress through the growth and progression of others. It thus goes beyond western dualism where nature opposes society and the individual opposes community. Culture is a central pillar of the lifestyles of the indigenous people. It shapes the belief systems, worldviews, epistemologies and cosmologies that shape human interaction with nature. Culture is nearly impossible to define. There are as many types of cultures as there are societies and communities. The range of meanings of culture is abundant. Its breath spans the spiritual and the physical to material and emotional features of society or group. In the particular context of the indigenous people, culture is the way of life for an entire society. According to the Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology, culture “includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behavior... and systems of beliefs”.

### **Anthropocene epoch**

We may or may not be close to the “end of nature” but the Anthropocene epoch is already upon us. It is the upshot of human activities having transgressed critical planetary boundaries. The impact of human activity is so powerful on the environment, climate and ecology of the planet that it will leave a long-term signature in the strata record. In 2016, the world slipped into ecological debt having consumed more resources and produced more waste than nature could absorb and replace.

The Anthropocene forces us to not only alter our relationship with the planet but also re-contextualise how we deal with environment, life and livelihood. In these unprecedented

waves of adversity, only the lifestyles and cosmology of the indigenous people provide us multiple layers of resilience.

The resilience is rooted in traditional knowledge and the indigenous people look to their traditional practices to adapt to adversities. Staying connected to family and community too is a source of their resilience. Through a culture of sharing and their ability to do more with less, there may be poverty among the indigenous people but there is no problem of squalor. Life may be hard but it is looked upon as an opportunity. It is this resilience that the indigenous people count on dealing with climate crisis. As the International Indigenous People's Forum on Climate Change made a statement at the Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, "We reiterate the need for recognition of our traditional knowledge (which)...is our vital contribution to climate change adaptation and mitigation"<sup>1</sup>.

This resilience is also reflected in the taboos on hunting and consumption of fishes, waterfowl and other aquatic animals during certain periods as also in the harvesting and consumption of certain plants among the Meiteis of Manipur and the preservation of sacred groves in Meghalaya<sup>2</sup>.

It is time to reflect critically upon prevailing development trajectories and chart new pathways that lead to outcomes that are economically, socially and culturally sustainable. Andreas Weber, author of the essay under review, too emphasises that we take "the worldviews of indigenous peoples seriously" as there is a lot "to learn from animistic worldviews".

### **Cosmology of conservation**

For thousands of years, the indigenous people of the North-east of India have lived their worldviews and believed in a cosmology of conservation in which humans constituted one of many elements along with animals, birds, trees, clouds, mountains and earth. Humans were not seen as superior to other life forms or elements in this system and they had a

responsibility to maintain the world they shared.

The organic cosmology has shaped an ecological ethic that continues to guide the indigenous people's behavior and practices. Knowledge is passed on formally or informally among kin groups and the community through social encounters, oral traditions, ritual practices, song, dance and other ceremonies. The knowledge about human histories, cosmological observations, techniques of planting and harvesting and understanding of local ecosystems is passed on from generation to generation through phenomenological experience and everyday activities.

The indigenous people go around dragging a heavy body, the body of their ancestors and their history, tradition and knowledge. Each indigenous group in the Northeast contains the knowledge systems that are steeped in their history, tradition, relationship with local economy, with people's lives and the way they understand the world around them. The indigenous people and communities have left an answer which can be helpful not only for our societies but also for the wider world<sup>3</sup>.

The traditional knowledge of the indigenous people of Northeast India is fast becoming a vanishing world. It remains largely undocumented, and with rapid socio-economic transformation, it runs the risk of dying out or being distorted beyond recognition. This knowledge encompasses the sophisticated array of information, understanding and interpretations that guide human societies in their interactions in varying fields – agriculture and animal husbandry, fishing, coping with diseases, explaining natural phenomena and strategies to cope with fluctuating environments.

### **Story telling**

The importance of story-telling in preserving the knowledge

systems can't be overemphasised. As T S Eliot says, "We have lost knowledge in information and wisdom in knowledge"<sup>4</sup>. Story telling is necessary for earthly survival. Nothing is just a story. Only through stories can the invisible, the inarticulate and the silent beings speak to us and re-imagine the traditional wisdom and knowledge that have great resonance in our everyday lives about nature, environment and livelihood among others. The past thus reaches out to us. Story telling is both prayer and elegy, which transmits histories, memories, traumas, hopes and dreams of the indigenous people.

The people of the Northeast have been handing down useful lessons from one generation to another. Much of these are part of oral traditions. As Sitakant Mahapatra says, the oral tradition "covers the world of knowledge and is the only pragmatic way of socialisation, learning and transmission of knowledge"<sup>5</sup>.

The tradition of story-telling facilitates this transfer of knowledge. Traditional storytelling privileges holistic interconnectedness, reciprocity, spirituality and knowledge transmission.

A familiar criticism of the body of work that Green theorists have produced is that it is dystopian in its diagnosis and utopian in terms of its prognosis. The essay by Andreas Weber titled, *Sharing Life. The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity*, doesn't fall in that category. It is a sparkling essay and his concepts are massively forceful. He offers a whole new range of vocabularies and narratives for the Anthropocene epoch. The essay offers a useful guide and a powerful antidote to the dangerous oversimplification of the complex issue.

Defining and contextualising a plethora of new terms and idioms would have been helpful in view of a multiplicity of positions within radical ecological thinking. Though challenging and at times abstruse, Weber's essay is highly relevant for

academics and practitioners alike, which will help unpack the fast changing language and vocabulary for the Anthropocene epoch. Weber's analysis of the "enlivenment" concept and the strategies for sustainability in the Anthropocene very well capture the Zeitgeist, however much of the vocabulary relating to the Anthropocene will continue to acquire new meanings and connotations for a long time to come.

This eclectic and profoundly insightful essay covers a wide range of issues like ecological good, family of being(s), coming for kin, animism and animistic thinking in the Anthropocene, self-colonisation of the West, rules of aliveness, ecopolitics and rules for behaving well in the society of being.

Weber links the coronavirus outbreak to "the destruction of habitats", mass consumption of "animals from rare species" and "human encroachment on what is not human". Leading American scientist Thomas Lovejoy also supports this view saying the pandemic is "not nature's revenge, we did it to ourselves"<sup>6</sup>.

As Weber rightly maintains, animism is the "cosmology of the indigenous peoples", which underlines the "reciprocity among beings – human and non-human persons". In a cosmos of relationships, "reciprocity is required in order to thrive".

Animism is widely prevalent in the Northeast of India, which has gone through stages of animism, polytheism and monotheism. In Arunachal Pradesh, where animism is practiced widely, there is tremendous diversity in the nature of deities, spirits, festivities, rituals and oral traditions. Therefore, projecting the indigenous people as some Western scholars often do as "ecological sentinels" or "unsung heroes" only perpetuates the colonial clichés. This is where self-colonisation of the West, as Weber emphasises, becomes extremely important.



The westerners need to learn “how to behave as individuals within the larger context of the collective life”. Weber calls it “unbraining”.

No one could disagree that the animistic worldviews of indigenous people can be precious for the current crises faced by the Anthropocene epoch. But his analysis raises more questions than answers.

What might it mean, in practical terms, to follow the example of animists, indigenous or otherwise? Is it possible to become an animist or is such a desire a symptom of (post) modernist anomie, an ecological romanticisation of indigenous cultures or what has been called ‘fetishisation of fetishism’? There is also no clarity regarding the redistribution of personhood in a way that undoes notions of bodily and territorial sovereignty. What does it mean to ascribe legal personhood to a river and what contradictions arise when indigenous people utilise the state’s judicial bodies in order to protest dispossession and protect the land?

Weber’s essay is one of the most damning accounts of environmental degradation, which is the result of our lust for excess. His perspectives and insights are highly instructional, edifying but also transformative. The indigenous people in the Northeast of India may find his major conclusions echoing their worldviews and cosmo-ecological thoughts. The essay may help generate generalisable insights about trends and principles regarding the perspectives of the indigenous people and validate their ontologies and epistemologies.

The practical suggestions about how to interact with the persons that constitute the ecosystem are very significant. The essence of “different ecological practice” to take only what you need is Gandhian. Gandhi too had famously said, “Those who don’t know when enough is enough will never have enough but those who know when enough is enough

already have enough”<sup>7</sup>.

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe has said, “When ideas fail, words come in very handy.” Andreas Weber’s case could be just the opposite. His ideas are great and extremely relevant for the time. But his use of complex terms and concepts may create a sense of *la langue de bois*, the language of evasion, in some quarters. Weber looks like an excellent pathologist but not so good physician. He has diagnosed the crisis correctly. But he seems to be prescribing unaffordable remedies.

Weber’s essay is a powerful manifesto screaming for action. It is also a timely resonance for a new era of pandemics and climate crisis. While he wants western thinkers to undertake a “journey of unlearning” and to “open up to what it is not”, his essay, in his own words, should be seen as an “open query” and an “attempt at self-decolonisation”. But “healing”, as he says, “is the process itself, not the end of it”. True, some wounds never heal. But deepest wounds can’t heal until they are expressed.

1

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3

This is part of the leitmotif of the India Office of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung's ongoing work in the North East which the WorkSpace working group is currently grappling with.

4

Taken from the opening stanza of T.S. Eliot's *Choruses from the Rock*.

5

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**Shrishtee Bajpai**

## **A living hill: Reflections on animistic worldviews, stories, resistance and hope**

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This reflection piece attempts to illuminate different ways of being and relating in the world while reflecting on the essay by Andreas Weber titled “Sharing Life. The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity.” It attempts to compliment Weber’s essay by illustrating a few examples from India and rest of the world that evoke animistic cosmologies or reverence to the rest of nature and how that has informed their struggles against destructive development. From Adivasi communities in Central and Eastern India to the Sioux Tribe of North Dakota and many others, this piece weaves together visions of ‘wellbeing’ that are guided by the rhythms and moods of the natural world.

Towards the end, the piece makes a few suggestions of how some recent events on rights of nature across the world could open up the opportunity of reversing our current destructive relationship with nature to that of harmony and respect. Stressing on the need of acknowledging and respecting different ways of knowing and being in this world, this piece supports the articulation of such alternative worldviews where they exist as crucial in defining, living, supporting and propagating the paradigms of well-being that are just, equitable and ecologically wise.

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has shown the deep fractures of the neo-liberal societies and the baseless promises of well-being that the capitalist model made to the whole world. But importantly, it has shown to us, especially the ones who pretend to be blind and deaf, that the earth is alive. Not only alive, but she can in no time wipe

out the empires and static edifices that the humans so much pride upon. The insurgence of life that we see in innumerable actions of solidarity, cooperation, love, and care in these times are rooted in the aeons old articulations of indigenous and other nature dependent communities.

Weber's paper 'Sharing Life. The Ecolitics of Reciprocity' locates itself in these very interesting times and critiques the 'western cognitive empire', which is based on positivist science of viewing relationships as social contracts and colonises the peoples and lands that challenge its hegemony. Weber delves into the concept of Animism from a decolonised approach and puts forth a comprehensive understanding of Animism and what it can mean for reviving our collapsing world.

This piece, while complimenting Weber's paper, recounts some of the expressions (among many) of recognising the natural world as persons, spirits, and deities with an agency of their own. And how these visions can help us in transcending the excesses of the Anthropocene and offer us pathways for the future. The attempt is to illustrate some grounded struggles of emergence that are guided by the rhythms and moods of the natural world by respecting the ecological limits and commanding cooperation with the natural world. These struggles actively resist the modern, rational, mechanistic, extractive and utilitarian western cognitive empire.

### **More than human world – articulations of indigenous struggles**

It was February 2018. I was in Korchi<sup>1</sup> territory in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra attending an annual pilgrimage by the Adivasis (a collective term for India's indigenous peoples) of 33 territorial villages of total 133 villages. Rao Pat Ganga Ram Ghat pilgrimage is an annual gathering of seven clans of Gond Adivasis in these 33 territorial villages in Korchi to celebrate the deities, seek penance of their past actions and



guidance for the future. It is in the state of trance that the beings of this world interact with the beings that are invisible to the naked eyes. "Rao Pat Gangaram Ghat is just one of the many deities residing in these sacred forests of Kanni Mathh Pahad<sup>2</sup>. There are many others such as 'Kankal Karo', 'Sakhri Pat' and the spots where we have buried the young ones are sacred too. The forest spirits are not visible to our eyes, and so is the air, but does that mean that the air does not exist," said a Gond Adivasi elder when we asked about the deities in the forests. Gonds are India's indigenous peoples with a population of about 2 million inhabiting all of Central and South-central India. The Adivasis in Korchi as in many other parts of India are dependent on their forests for sustenance, livelihoods, social-cultural and spiritual practices. This dependence guides their daily practices of living, science, traditions, identity, culture and now their resistance to destructive development. A Gond Adivasi elder narrated to us their cosmological duty: "In our creation, we are given the responsibility to protect, guard, and preserve one plant, animal or bird. If your Totem is mango, then you will not eat mangoes or cut a mango tree for your life, what may come. His is a goat (he was pointing at his friend), he will never eat a goat, because if we all start eating goats then who will protect them?"

Pilgrimages have been a spiritual duty among Gonds for thousands of years, but with changing times these are also becoming spaces to reclaim the rapidly threatened indigenous cultures and ecology. These yatras are signifiers of deep relationships that sustain the ability of the Adivasis to live with the rest of nature in harmony. As another Adivasi elder told us, "Nature is our God. Adivasis do not make cement idols or statues. The leaves, tree, animals, and the spirits in the forest are our gods." The traditional forests of Korchi have been legally recorded to be the customary forest of the villages. However, a significant section of this area has been earmarked for iron-ore mining despite people's strong objections. The model of development and progress

has been completely blind to acknowledge peoples' spiritual, philosophical, and physical interdependence with the rest of nature. The communities are strongly resisting the mining in their forests since 2007 and articulating that reciprocity is at the nucleus of a thriving life. One of the Adivasi elder told us: "Why we oppose this project, you ask. Let us assume that we Adivasis will have to leave the forest if the government and the mining company displace us. But our forest deities have no other place to go. I might shift to a city with my deity, but our collective deity of 33 villages resides in these hills, within these forests, where will the deity go?"

A similar struggle in the Niyamgiri hills ranges in eastern state of Odisha in India unfolded more than a decade ago. The Dongria Kondhs, a pre-modern Adivasi community resisted against the Vedanta Corporation, which planned to extract the estimated \$2 billion worth of bauxite that lies under the surface of the Niyamgiri hills. The Dongria Kondhs believe that the Niyam Raja (literally Lord of the Law)<sup>3</sup> is the protector, the keeper and the provider of the forests. Dongrias being the protectors of the many streams of Niyamgiri as Niyam Raja's kith and kin, simply abide by the sacred laws set by the Niyam Raja. These laws disallow the destruction of the forests and its species for any unsustainable use. Just like the Gonds in the Korchi, the Dongria Kondhs believe that the stones, leaves, hills and streams have spirits and this command a reciprocal and cooperative relationship<sup>4</sup>. The Supreme Court of India recognised their right to worship Niyam Raja under the Article 25 and Article 26 of the Indian Constitution<sup>5</sup>. The struggle of the Dongria Kondhs is historic in many ways. Among many, the one that is very relevant here is their articulation of worldviews rooted in interdependence, respecting human limits, relationships with more-than humans, cooperation, and supporting the life to flourish. Another recent example of indigenous peoples' rising is the Standing Rock movement of 2016 in the United States

against the pipeline threat to Sioux Tribe's primary water supply, the Missouri river. The articulation that the river is a living being was at the core of the movement.

“When we cross the river, we pray to the river. We have a connection to the river. The river is a living being and water is the first medicine of the world,” says Ladonna Brave Bull, one of the earliest to protest the proposed Dakota pipeline. This cosmological connection with the nature resonated with hundreds of indigenous people across the world and many other nature dependent communities. A million gathered at the protesting sites with the Sioux people. “Everywhere you walked there were people praying, singing, and dancing. People from around the world brought water from their rivers, their ponds, their oceans to put it in our river. Every day, there were prayer ceremonies as the waters from the world were put into our river. I think that was the key to touching the world,” adds Ladonna Brave Bull.

The Standing Rock movement not only connected many movements together but also healed the people who protested by evoking sacredness and the aliveness of the natural world into protests.

### **Wellbeing - multiple ways of being and knowing**

Many South American and indigenous scholars stress that the concept of wellbeing, as conceptualised by the West, fundamentally lacks the radical questioning of the core concepts of modernity (Chuji et.al. 2019)<sup>6</sup>. However, there have been many ways that the communities across the world have articulated their visions of ‘good life’ deeply rooted in their connections to the rest of life. Buen Vivir, or living well, an ensemble of South American perspective of a good life, express a deeper change in knowledge, affectivity and spirituality, and gives an ontological opening to other forms of understanding human and non-human relationships (Chuji

et.al. 2019)<sup>7</sup>. The Ashaninkas of the Peruvian Amazon use the term, Kametsa Asaïke, which means “living well together in a place” wherein individual wellbeing is subject to collective wellbeing, which includes humans and more than humans like forests, waters, mountains, animals, birds and everything that the mother earth nourishes (Caruso and Barletti 2019<sup>8</sup>). Similar yet different in many ways, the native people of Amazonia believe that the Kawsak Sacha, the rain forest, is a living being with a spirit that gives them energy, breadth of life, wisdom, vision, responsibility, solidarity, and commitment (Gualinga 2019)<sup>9</sup>. It guides and organises the life of humans in harmony with the earth called the Allapamama. In Japan, Kyosei meaning symbiosis is a social ideal that describes the integral convivial relation between humans and non-humans to challenge the ecological and social evils (Fuse 2019)<sup>10</sup>. A similar concept from South Africa, called Ubuntu, meaning “We are, therefore I am”, resting on the idea that one can realise one’s true self only by relating to the ‘Other’ (Grange 2019)<sup>11</sup>. It reflects the solidarity that binds all humans and non-humans together. These worldviews reveal that there is no single definition of wellbeing or a good life. These expressions thread a tapestry of many varied possibilities of defining ways of social life and wellbeing. While actively resisting the idea of development that thrives on endless growth, commodification of human and natural lives.

### **Signaling a shift**

There have been series of events<sup>12</sup> by courts or the government across the worlds that have made the beginning of a radical shift from an extractive mindset to one where nature is being understood as a living being. On March 16, 2017, the New Zealand Parliament passed into law the Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Bill, which gives the Whanganui river and ecosystem legal personality and standing in its own right, guaranteeing its ‘health and wellbeing’. By evoking the Iwi cosmology “We are the River and the River is

Us”, the Crown recognised and apologised for all the wrongs done to the river and to the Iwi people in the past. Given the long history of struggle by the Iwi people to safeguard the interests of the Whanganui river, the granting of legal personhood status of the river is only the first step towards reversing the marred relationship. It also opens up the opportunity for us to alter the anthropocentric and colonised law and move towards a pluriversal legal framework.

Close on its heels, the Uttarakhand high court in India ruled<sup>13</sup> (in two separate orders on March 22 and March 30, 2017) that the north Indian rivers, Ganga and Yamuna, their tributaries, and the glaciers and catchment feeding these rivers in Uttarakhand, have rights as a ‘juristic/ legal person/ living entity’<sup>14</sup>. The court judgments in India could be the beginning of transforming its legislative approach to nature and help in changing the discourse of prioritising human wants over the rest of nature. These judgments could open up the possibilities of articulating indigenous worldviews of viewing nature as a living being in the formal systems and eventually be used to stop destruction; for example, if the Dibang river in the Northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, currently at the centre of controversy because of the 3,097 megawatt (mw) Etalin hydroelectric project proposed to be built across it, had the fundamental right to live. What if the rivers had the right to perform their ecological functions without any human-made hindrance, just like you and I have to life and speech? What if the proposed diversion of 1,150.08 hectares of forest land and felling of over 270,000 trees<sup>15</sup> in what official documents call “subtropical evergreen broad-leaved and subtropical rainforest” was equivalent to murder or genocide?

### **Beyond rights**

Though for the rights of rivers (and more generally of nature) to be safeguarded, we need major transformations in the

consciousness, values, and actions of people living along or using them. Eventually, these rights (beyond the law) have to extend to other non-human objects, helping to move towards a society whose concern or moral consideration expands not just to human community but the entire earth. For this, first, we need to begin questioning the fundamental forms of injustices, including capitalism, statism, anthropocentrism and patriarchy. Second, we need to include customary laws and practices into the western-rationalistic law, state and bureaucracy. Third, we need more imaginative lawyers, activists, judges, policy makers to help move towards a pluriversal institutional and legal framework. Fourth, there is a dire need to pay attention and listen to the nature-dependent communities who offer us alternative imaginations of being and relating in the world. Ultimately, we will be able to achieve harmony with the rest of the living world not so much because we have given it legal rights, but rather because it is simply the only way life thrives and sustains.

1

The author along with colleagues has been engaged in Korchi for 3 years. A brief overview of the process can be read here: <https://in.boell.org/en/2019/12/19/mining-conflict-and-transformative-alternatives-korchi>

2

Kanni Mathh pahadi is the name of the sacred hill for Gond adivasis of one traditional territory called the Padiyal Job (comprising of 33 villages) in Korchi, Gadchiroli.

3

Naik, A. 2019. Law's Nature. Seminar 721, 46-52.

4

Meenal Tatpati, Ashish Kothari and Rashi Mishra, *The Niyamgiri Story: Challenging the Idea of Growth Without Limits*, in Neera Singh et.al (eds.), *Ecologies of Hope and Transformation: Post-Development Alternatives From India*. Kalpavriksh and SOPPECOM, Pune, 2018, at p. 91 and 92.

5

Article 25 provides that all persons 'are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion' whereas Article 26 provides that every religious denomination shall have the right 'to manage its own affairs in matters of religion.'

6

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This report can be referred to see the timeline of the events (annexure): <http://vikalpsangam.org/article/dialogue-on-rights-of-rivers-report-and-annexures/#.XxU5vp4zblU>

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In July 2017, the UHC order was stayed by the Supreme Court of India, after the state of Uttarakhand filed a petition against it, arguing that the order is legally unsustainable and simply not 'practical'.

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<https://india.mongabay.com/2020/05/etalin-hydel-plants-future-now-hangs-on-its-economic-viability/>



## Biographies

**Abhishek Chauhan** is a researcher and designer, with interests ranging in new media, technology studies and art. He explores visual language through graphics and video. Abhishek has completed his Master of Design (2016-18) from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati and Bachelor (Design) from National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Gandhinagar in Gujarat.

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**Aküm Longchari** is an indigenous Naga person from Nagaland. Aküm is the co-founder and publisher of The Morung Express, an independent daily English language newspaper in Dimapur in the state, and a consultant for peace education.

Aküm has been involved in people's movements in the areas of human rights, self-determination, JustPeace, and reconciliation since 1994. He has been a member of the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) since its formation in 2008.

Aküm, a graduate from St. Stephens College in New Delhi, did his LLB from Campus Law Centre of Delhi University. He did his Masters in Conflict Transformation from Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA where he later became a visiting scholar. He completed his PhD from the University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia and he was also a Caux Scholar at the Caux Scholars Program, Geneva, Switzerland.

Aküm is a published author and his first book, *Self-Determination – A Resource for JustPeace*, was published in 2016 by Heritage Publishing House, Dimapur, Nagaland. He currently lives with his family in Dimapur, Nagaland.

**Andreas Weber**, 52, is a marine biologist and philosopher based in Berlin, Germany, and Italy. He develops a "Biopoetics", a new understanding of life as an embodied process of subjectivity and shared meaning. Andreas teaches Ecophilosophy at the Universi-

ty of the Arts (UdK), Berlin. His latest books are “Matter & Desire. An Erotic Ecology” (Chelsea Green, 2017) and “Enlivenment. Toward a Poetics of the Anthropocene” (MIT Press, 2019).

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**Ash Narain Roy** Ash Narain Roy is a PhD in International Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. He spent more than four years at El Colegio de Mexico, Mexico City, as Visiting Scholar in the early 1980s. He worked with Hindustan Times as Assistant Editor from 1990 to 2001. He has published several papers in national and international journals and presented dozens of papers in international seminars and conferences on democracy, local government, federalism, globalisation and Indian foreign policy. He has followed developments in the Northeast for the past 30 years. Roy is a member of the advisory board of several universities and think tanks. He has authored/ edited several books including Development, Decentralisation and Democracy published by Orient BlackSwan. He is currently Director, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

**Bhagat Oinam** is currently Professor of Philosophy at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He works on philosophical anthropology, socio-cultural philosophy, ethics and aesthetics. In addition, he writes on indigenous knowledge, conflict and identity politics in Northeast India.

**Daniel Langthasa** is a 37 year old artist and politician based in Haflong, a hill station in Dima Hasao, an autonomous district of North East India. Daniel was an engineering student when his father was killed by extremists in 2007. He gave up engineering after the incident and started writing music with an aim to discourage young people from joining extremist groups. He writes music solo as Mr.India and is part of a band named Digital Suicide. He joined active politics in 2018 and is currently an elected member from Haflong in the autonomous council of Dima Hasao district.

**Jayanta Kumar Sarma** is an independent researcher. His areas of

interest are traditional knowledge system, bio-culturalism, natural resource management, livelihood planning. He has extensive work experience in Northeast India for more than 25 years. He is now associated with Aaranyak, Guwahati as a consultant.

Sarma has to his credit publication of more than 15 research papers, four book chapters, developing and editing of user manual on watershed management, and geo-spatial analysis. He had edited a 11-activity manual for a series titled “Explore and understand your environment, people and their practices” developed for the children adopting the principle of inquiry based integrated learning, published by Vigyan Prasar, Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. He writes a series of public communication monographs in Assamese language on climate change adaptation, homestead agro-forestry, systematic rice intensification, recovering wealth from waste, watershed management, nature study, natural resource management. He frequently writes on traditional knowledge system related issues of Northeast India on different online portals and is also involved in documentary filming as a researcher, theme writer, scrip writer and associate director.

Sarma is presently involved as Technical Coordinator and Chief Editor in a project of handbook development on “Science and Technology for Women Entrepreneurship in North East India” in six different languages (English, Hindi, Assamese, Bodo, Karbi, Galo and Pali). It is a project of Vigyan Prasar in collaboration with Arunachal Pradesh State Council for Science and Technology.

***Kaustubh Deka*** teaches at the Department of Political Science, Dibrugarh University, Assam. Formerly he was with the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi. He has been a Fellow at the Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, Chennai, where he looked into the issue of youth and political participation in the context of India's Northeast. He holds a doctorate from the School of Social Science, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His academic interest includes besides others, issues of ecological politics in Northeast India, trends of youth politics and identity assertion in the region as well

as inquiries into understanding the category of Northeast India.

**Linda Chhakchhuak** is an independent journalist based in Shillong, Meghalaya. She is co-founder and publisher of Grassroots Options, a magazine that started in 1995 to focus on people, environment and development of Northeast India. She has also worked for many newspapers and news sites across the board since 1993. A student of history and social anthropology, she is involved with many networks and campaigns on people's rights issues.

**Marion Regina Mueller** has been co-curator of this assemblage on Alternative Worldviews as well as for the WorkSpace Northeast process. Marion works with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung India Office in Delhi since 2018, and, with a background in Socio Cultural Studies and Arts as well as Gender, Governance and Development, has been working with international and local NGOs and government institutions in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan since 1999. Engaging with local communities, civil society, think tanks and government representatives her focus has been on ecology and resource politics, strengthening of women's and human rights, supporting of women's political representation and strengthening of peace processes. Core of her work has always been to create spaces that enable to include the needs and interests of diverse stakeholders into political but most of all creative dialogue, participatory enquiry and decision making, especially those of local communities, women and minorities.

**Meghna Singh** is a queer feminist and a cultural worker based in Delhi. She works with Zubaan, an independent feminist publishing house and an NGO working to recognise and highlight marginalised voices and perspectives within feminist movements in India.

**Shrishtee Bajpai** is a researcher- activist based in Pune and is member of an environmental action group- Kalpavriksh. Her current research is focussed on exploring alternatives to mainstream

development models, documenting worldviews of communities and networking. She helps in coordinating a process called the Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence). It is an ongoing process of bringing together practitioners, thinkers, researchers, and others working on alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic development and political governance. She is a core team member of global platform similar and partly inspired by the Indian process called the -Global Tapestry of Alternatives. The process aims at creating exchanges, synergies, cross-learning, and collaboration amongst the various radical alternative and social/ecological justice movements around the world. She is also involved in organising Rights of Rivers dialogue in India next year and involved in research and advocacy for recognising rights of rivers in India.

Apart from this, I am deeply interested in birds, listening to music, reading, peanuts & almonds, hot-water baths, swimming and walking.

**Sonal Jain** is the co-founder of Desire Machine Collective (2004) and project Periferry. She works at the intersection of art, ecology, technology and activism. Her practice spans film, video, photography, digital media, public intervention, curation and writing. She has written a feature film script and is a published author. She has taught at the premiere art and design schools of India like the National Institute of Design and shown her work at prominent venues of the world: Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York and The Venice Biennale.

**Uttam Bathari** works as Associate Professor in the Department of History, Gauhati University where he teaches History of Medieval and Modern Assam.



**Disclaimer:**

This publication was prepared with the support of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. The views and analysis contained in the publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the foundation.

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**Editorial:*****Sharing Life.***

*The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity*

**Series:**

Alternative Worldviews

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The Artwork in the book is an attempt in collaboration with Leaves and stones for portrayal of the ideas, in response to Andreas's essay.

Posthumously inspired by the works of 'Siddesh' and his concept of जड़-चेतन(Jadd Chetan) which is to animate the lifeless stones. जड़-चेतन (Jadd Chetan) is root consciousness and life in lifeless.


Printed on 100% Recycled paper

**Printer:**

Naveen Printers  
New Delhi,  
December 2020

**ISBN:**

978-3-86928-221-3

 **HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG**  
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The *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* is a German foundation and part of the Green movement that has developed worldwide as a response to the traditional politics of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism. We are a green think-tank and an international policy network, our main tenets are ecology and sustainability, democracy and human rights, self-determination and justice. We place particular emphasis on gender democracy, meaning social emancipation and equal rights for women and men. We are also committed to equal rights for cultural and ethnic minorities. Finally, we promote non-violence and proactive peace policies. To achieve our goals, we seek strategic partnerships with others who share our values.

Our eponymous, Heinrich Böll, personifies the values we stand for: protection of freedom, civic courage, tolerance, open debate, and the valuation of art and culture as independent spheres of thought and action.

Our India Liaison Office was established in 2002 in New Delhi.

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Evolving around the main essay “Sharing life. The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity” all contributions to this assemblage reflect a common understanding that ecology and biodiversity needs to be reclaimed – and constantly generated – as a process of lived and living realities in a system of reciprocal relationships. Accordingly, this assemblage itself creates in its parts and as a whole an image of this interwoven system and linkages, drawing an alternative ecological and political landscape. It should be seen as a constant process and as an invitation to a dialogue about a common ecological future.

This assemblage of stories, poetry, song, artwork and academic writings, speaks about alternative worldviews and traditional knowledge systems of the people of Northeast India and beyond.



ISBN 978-3-86928-221-3



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