

NASHIRA, BUILDING A NEW MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN COLOMBIA

In the first century AD in the Cauca River Valley in what is now Colombia, there lived a community that is believed to have adhered to maternal principles and worshipped an earth mother figure and many female deities. The Malagana culture was only discovered 17 years ago when a sugar cane worker accidentally uncovered a gold figure. He had discovered a remarkable hoard of ceramic and gold artefacts, very different in character from other previously familiar indigenous cultures found in the region. The gold pieces were very fine and experts have recognised their quality by comparing them to objects found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. The ceramics depict mostly female figures and amongst them were alcarrazas or drinking vessels with double spouts in the shape of houses or multiple female breasts, and quite distinct from any seen before in other pre-Columbian cultures. Archeologists believe the Malagana culture with its very exquisite artistic talents only lasted a few centuries and it was soon superseded by the Yotoco culture, a warring society that extended its influence by conquest over a large area.

Significantly and symbolically, the ecovillage Nashira is located in the same area as the recently discovered Malagana culture. Nashira is an ambitious project near Palmira in the Cauca river valley in Colombia that aims to solve not only the problems of poverty which affect a considerable section of the Colombian population, but also to serve as pilot project for a community directed by women where matriarchal principles and the gift economy are an integral part of the project.

The Uruguayan journalist and philosopher Eduardo Galeano, describes the precarious social situation of Latin America (and other developing areas) thus:

“Every year poverty kills more people than the entire Second World War, which killed quite a few. But from the vantage point of the powerful extermination is not a bad idea if it helps to regulate a population that is growing too fast. Experts decry surplus population in the South where ignorant masses violate the Sixth Commandment day and night: surplus population in

Brazil where there are seventeen inhabitants per square kilometre or in Colombia where there are twenty-nine? Holland has four hundred inhabitants per square kilometre and no Dutchman dies of hunger, but Brazil and Colombia belong to a handful of gluttons.”

In Colombia, 32% of households are headed by women and depend on their work as the main source of income. As a result of the gender structure of Colombian society and high male mortality rates, due to 50 years of civil war, massive displacement of rural communities and endemic violence, women are frequently responsible for the care of the family including the elderly as well as children. Sadly 72.5% of homes with women as heads of households are below the poverty line. Women with little or no formal education have a difficult time finding work, and there is little and often no state welfare system to protect the unemployed, or aid for families with dependent children. Most of the women in Nashira work as day workers, cleaning houses, washing and ironing clothes, or as caretakers of empty farms with no remuneration other than a roof over their heads. The idea of owning their own house and being able to grow their own food and generate income through the Nashira project was of course a very appealing one.

THE BEGINNING

The Association of Women Heads of Families (Association Mujer Cabeza de Familia, ASOMUCAF) is the principal force developing the “Nashira” project. www.asomucaf.org.co. ASOMUCAF is a non-profit organization founded in 1994 in Cali, Colombia, for the purpose of helping low income and unemployed women to acquire a source of regular income.

Asomucaf started with a paper recycling project, in which newspaper and office waste paper was collected and through a very simple process, transformed it into hand-made paper and products made from this paper.

Through a project sponsored by the British Embassy, and making use of their own teaching centre, (“El Instituto de Educacion para el Trabajo”) Asomucaf trained 300 women as monitors for a community project which involved creating 40 ecological productive units in 40 schools.

Each unit consisted a unit producing schoolbooks, a recycling warehouse, a compost heap and an organic vegetable garden. In addition to the paper production, the Association has a small shop located in downtown Cali in a house provided by the founder where the hand made paper and products are sold as well as other craft products made by women. The Association participates in local and International craft fairs. Through our mailing list we are able every year to sell Christmas cards designed and made by our members. To date, approximately 1000 families headed by women on the department of Cauca and Valle, Colombia, have been helped by income from this project.

The success of this project and other ecological and educational projects and the urgent need to provide affordable housing, encouraged the Association to branch out into more ambitious projects such as “Nashira”, our ecological sustainable development eco-community, which provides a better quality of life for families headed by women.

Nashira will have 88 housing units, distributed in groups of 8 houses, which correspond to a production unit. At present there are 41 houses ready for occupation and 21 families have moved to Nashira, despite the fact that the water purification system is not yet fully functioning. There are facilities for chicken and quail rearing, worm beds to produce compost. A restaurant with a solar powered kitchen, and a kiln to burn ceramics are now ready, and a small plant to produce products made from the fruit of the noni shrub is being built. Each house has its own vegetable garden to grow at least some of the food consumed by the family. A fish pond is being planned to use with the waste water, after treatment by a system of filters and artificially created wetlands. Every Saturday, the present and future inhabitants of Nashira hold a market and fair where their products are sold. There is also a community shop and a second hand clothing store, which is run by one of the productive units.

The Association has been in charge of marketing their products, but it is important at this stage to increase the income of the women by gaining access to international markets, not

only to sell their products but also to promote the unique development model demonstrated through the Nashira project .

As a pilot project to solve the problems faced by low-income households headed by women, this is an important initiative which can be multiplied not only in Colombia where models of this sort are infrequent but also as a possible solution to similar problems faced by many developing countries.

Funding

From the very beginning Nashira has promoted collective processes and inter-institutional cooperation. The 32.000 square metres of land on which the ecovillage has and is being constructed was a donation. The Colombian government through a subsidy policy for rural housing provided the funds for environmentally friendly building materials such as the prefabricated panels made from recycled building debris. The women worked, building the houses under professional supervision, thereby making it possible to move into the houses without the need for mortgages or down payment in other words they won't have to pay even one cent as the housing is free. Frequently projects have failed as the homeowners lose their houses for lack of a steady or sufficient income from which to make monthly repayments. The water purification system and the waste management system have been financed by funds obtained from the provincial government. A farmers' cooperative from Catalonia has invited the women of Nashira for several years to go and work on a temporary basis during the annual fruit harvest, and they have also financed a part of the waste management system. A part of the money earned in Catalonia has also been used for the water system, a good example of the Gift Economy in action.

Further funds are being sought for projects such as the fish ponds, the instalation of a biogas plant, and solar energy installations. Equipping a classroom for computer teaching and a business centre, are also important as they will provide the necessary technology to have access to e markets, essential in order to optimize marketing possibilities and therefore assure the economic future of the women of Nashira and their families.

In this way 88 households headed by women have dedicated the past seven years to transforming a former finca amongst the sugarcane fields outside Palmira in the same region where 21 centuries ago another maternal culture flourished.

THE PROBLEMS

Today the women are in charge and they make sure that the ecovillage functions peacefully, each productive unit has a woman as coordinator and as treasurer. The board is composed only of women, this is not an easy task in a patriarchal society.

100 people are now living in Nashira. The women are familiar with matriarchal practices and the gift economy, but the men who have entered the community as partners have to be re-educated. Recently one of them arrived drunk and was refused entry at the main door. He nevertheless entered by cutting the fence and started making a scandal. The next day he was called to answer for his actions by the women's community relations committee. He was not happy to be asked to change his habits or accept psychological help from one of the students who work permanently in Nashira as part of an exchange programme with a local University. Finally he accepted unwillingly to do a job that was assigned to him as a punishment. He has not stopped drinking and remains a problem for the community.

In another case, a man insulted some women, who did not answer back. The next day however, the women wrote on the community notice board asking this man to behave himself properly. The act of public denunciation changed this man's attitude. If this had been an incident between men, it might well have ended in a fight perhaps using guns or knives.

On the positive side, the social organization of these women, based on matriarchal principles, is inspiring. Decisions are taken by consensus and tasks such as looking after the children of the community, and the cleaning and maintenance of common areas of the ecovillage are done through "mingas" or collective work. When there is a community job to be done, they make a large pot of sancocho, (a nutritious soup of chicken, plantain and cassava). Each family brings some food and they get all the community work done together. The women of

Nashira are in the process of creating a model project where generosity, solidarity, respect for the environment and maternal values are creating a happy and sustainable community. It is a social experiment, which as it expands, could change the world.