

## A Call for Attention to Indigenous Capitalisms

Alexis Celesete Bunten

*Intellectual Property in Cultural Heritage, Simon Fraser University  
FrameWorks Institute*

**ABSTRACT:** Indigenous Capitalisms are rooted in local concepts of wealth, accumulation and distribution, but they must operate within current global markets. Indigenous Capitalisms reflect Indigenous peoples' shifting political relationships to settler colonial states and the supranational organizations that drive international policy. As such, articulations of Indigenous Capitalisms can be measured as indices of self-determination, demonstrating to the world that Indigenous political entities engaging in global commerce will likely not simply dissolve into a multi-cultural body politic. Future research in this area should offer new ways of understanding the ties between economic issues and Indigenous lives, challenging existing stereotypes about Indigenous peoples' stakes in the global economy contributing to the growing discipline of Indigenous Studies.

**KEY WORDS:** Indigenous, capitalism, corporations, self-determination, Indigenous studies

### Introduction

An Alaska Native corporation, Chenega, increased its revenues from 13 million to 1.1 billion between 2005 and 2009, largely due to various multimillion dollar 8a US Federal contracts to rebuild Iraq, secure Guantanamo Bay and repair x-ray machines at airports and borders. Despite the fact that it saves American taxpayer dollars, the US SBA 8(a) Program has recently come under fire as "unfair" for the 2% sole source Federal contracts it awards to Alaska Natives as part of a larger mandate to help minority businesses grow (Halcro 2009). Since 2008, Chenega has spent 2.7 million to lobby Congress, and distributed roughly \$30,000 a year split among some 170 shareholders (Lafleur and Grabell 2011).

Meanwhile across the Pacific, the Maori corporation Ngai Tahu's earnings from its tourism subsidiaries dropped 15% in 2009, part of an overall economic slowdown that witnessed its surpluses

decline from 58.2 million to just 13.3 million over the previous financial year (Heather 2009). Ngai Tahu's responses included increased diversification across domestic and international markets including a \$15 million shareholding in Agria Singapore Pte Ltd and Chinese company New Hope Group, which owns Agria, New Zealand's largest rural services company driven by federal agricultural programs there and abroad (Ngai Tahu Holdings Group 2011).

These corporations are robustly engaged in late capitalism, characterized by techno-bureaucratic control and organizational structures that go beyond the monopoly stage of capitalism to transnationalism (Jameson 1991). Both corporations use modern technology to obtain lucrative government contracts that secure resources. While one specializes in information technology to contain and control an oil-rich part of the world, the other uses biotechnology to

increase valuable crop yields for food, energy, and raw material. From a superficial perspective, these entities appear to follow the same sets of antihumanist assumptions and goals that inform capitalism. Upon a deeper examination, however, Indigenous corporations share a set of features that distinguish them from their non-Indigenous counterparts shaped through the same global market forces that dictate organizational structures and operations.

This set of features, or a theory of Indigenous Capitalisms, can be understood in terms of an overarching ethos and “structure of feeling” influencing praxis. These include: **(1) historical and political relations of incorporation; (2) mitigating value systems; (3) a dual promise of subsumption and self-determination.** Indigenous Capitalisms describes a distinct strategy employed by Indigenous communities to take part in national and international level political economies while negotiating and asserting self-determination. Indigenous Capitalisms are complex; they are rooted in local concepts of wealth, accumulation and distribution, but they must operate within current global markets. Indigenous Capitalisms reflect Indigenous peoples’ shifting political relationships to settler colonial states and the supranational organizations that drive international policy. As such, articulations of Indigenous Capitalisms can be measured as indices of self-determination, demonstrating to the world that Indigenous political entities engaging in global commerce will likely not simply dissolve into a multicultural body politic.

My interest in this topic is derived from my previous research comparing Indigenous-owned tourism in the US and New Zealand, where I found striking similarities in Maori and Native American business strategies (Bunten 2010). After visiting many sites and conducting interviews with key stakeholders, I became interested in the diversified holdings of Indigenous corporations for whom tourism is just one business and the ways that these operations are managed. I found that among Maori and Native Alaskans, both groups share similar strategies rooted in Indigenous value systems. Through these preliminary findings, I have begun to build upon the concept of “Indigenous Capitalisms” as a distinct strategy to achieve culturally

appropriate participation within the global economy.

From these initial observations, I came to ask: Is there something about the way that Indigenous groups run corporations that demonstrates Indigenous versions of capitalism, in organization, philosophy, and practice? Are there patterns that emerge in comparing business practices among Indigenous groups that point to a shared consciousness or a distinct moral economy that can be extrapolated and theorized as “Indigenous Capitalisms?” My own optimistic take on Indigenous corporations understands them as a mechanism by which to gain equal footing with the settler state while simultaneously reinforcing Indigenous values. An alternative viewpoint considers incorporation as a smokescreen for the adoption of a materialist perspective, a sort of Faustian pact whereby Indigenous peoples finally benefit from their resources, but at the ultimate price of internal colonization.

Scholars have begun to shift their depictions of Indigenous communities as pre-capitalist to understanding them as complex, multifaceted, and dynamic in regard to economic issues. They are beginning to explore the issues surrounding Indigenous economic development and wealth in the United States (Mason 2002; Champagne 2007; Cattelino 2008, 2010; Harmon 2010), Canada (Hindle et al. 2005; Calliou 2005; Kuokkanen 2011) New Zealand (Petrie 2007; Wiketera and Bremner 2009; Spiller et al. 2010), and Australia (Foley 2000, 2006, 2007; Altman 2010). Still, Indigenous peoples are sorely missing from historical and contemporary accounts of capitalism in settler societies. Moreover, these writings are largely written from the logic of the dominant culture rather than one that privileges Indigenous epistemologies. And while work in comparative capitalisms has brought increased attention to Eastern European, Asian and Islamic versions of it (Yanagisako 2002; Gomes 2004; Vaknin 2005; Tripp 2006), scholars and policy makers have yet to consider Indigenous models in their understanding of development. This essay explores the key tenets of Indigenous Capitalisms through a brief examination of some of the issues faced by Indigenous corporations. It is a call to action for further research on this topic. With increased understanding, the concept of

Indigenous Capitalisms can be used as a theoretical tool to analyze complex processes of critical importance to Indigenous peoples' lives as they shape their evolving participation in global and local economies.

### Historical and Political Relations of Incorporation

Indigenous Corporations are not new; Alaska Native corporations have existed for 40 years. However, Indigenous business development has witnessed unparalleled growth and diversification over the past decade due to an emergent willingness of these communities to engage in the global economy, increased educational opportunities for their members and policy that encourages the formation and expansion of Indigenous businesses. Indigenous corporations are beginning to gain attention for their success in diversified ventures, particularly those that practice responsible investment driven by culturally-based value systems. Although like others operating within a capitalist framework, Indigenous corporations strive to maximize profit, establish entrepreneurship-development and environmental sustainability, and/or dovetail with older forms of welfare capitalism, they should be understood as related to, but not necessarily part of a single continuum of the Western capitalist framework.

Indigenous capitalism fundamentally differs from Western capitalism beginning with the historical-political conditions of incorporation. We find Indigenous corporations in Anglo, liberal-democratic, settler colonial states that both recognize the existence of Indigenous peoples, but grant them dependent sovereignty in the place of absolute sovereignty (if they recognize it at all). These nations have coerced incorporation on the Indigenous peoples within their borders through policy designed to mitigate inherent and treaty rights with economic development in the surrounding cash economy.

A corporation is formed when an individual or a group of investors decide to create it, to raise capital to invest and exchange specific commodities on the cash market. As such, corporations are the result of conscious decision-making on the part of those who form them, and they are willingly created. Indigenous corporations, on the other hand, may or may not be

the preferred institution from which to engage in commerce. As with most other Western institutions, the corporate structure was forced on Indigenous peoples by settler colonial governments as a way to manage fiscal reparations for broken promises, stolen lands, and the genocidal acts of colonization. Settler colonial governments bequeathed a business structure and capital on their Indigenous peoples, and told them to invest with it without initial purpose or buy in.

Alaska Native Corporations were formed through the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act as a way to manage \$962 million in reparations for lands erroneously sold by the Russians.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Canadian Indigenous economic development corporations began to emerge one by one, starting in the 1970s and through the 1980s, as structures to manage land claims settlements and to 'give' Canadian First Nations a 'window' onto the Canadian corporate world (Whittington 1986:38). Following several amendments to the 1975 Treaty of Waitangi Act, Maori Iwi and Hapu (tribes and sub-tribes) in New Zealand began the process of negotiating their land claims against the British crown for the breeches against the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi. Similar to North American settlements, Maori land claims (some of which are still in negotiation) take the form of cash and/or property, and following the Maori Land Act of 1993, many Maori beneficiaries have elected to manage investments through incorporation. Unlike Alaska and Canada, Australia passed the 1976 Aboriginal Councils and Association Act that provisioned for Aboriginal incorporation prior to landmark land claims settlement acts. Later, it was amended by the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander) Act, which eliminated communal ownership of some Aboriginal lands previously vested as inalienable and provided new measures and regulations for Aboriginal incorporation.

In all of these cases, settler colonial governments justified incorporation as the path to economic development and in three out of the four nations discussed, non-Native corporate interests impatiently waited in the wings for land disputes to be settled so that they

<sup>1</sup> While other Native American tribes outside of Alaska have established corporations, they were not mandated under direct legislation.

could access subsurface resources. Unlike the settlements negotiated in the British Commonwealth nations, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act decided the fate for all Alaska Natives in one fell swoop after oil was discovered in Alaska's North Slope in the late 1960s. Oil executives knew they needed to settle land claims across the entire state before they could construct an oil pipeline that would traverse lands traditionally occupied by several different tribal groups. They were painfully aware that Alaska Natives could potentially deadlock development for years, and were therefore eager for congress to negotiate terms that would be viewed as favourable to Alaska Native leaders, but would pave the way for natural resource extraction. Construction on the pipeline began in 1974, just three years after ANCSA was signed into law.

Like the Maori, Canadian and Australian incorporation via land claims was more piecemeal, with each individual group settling their claims with the government by terms set through shifting legislation. For example, the 1984 Western Arctic Claims Settlement Act resolved a decade-long dispute over Canada's assumption of Inuk resources, with CAN\$45 million dollars to be managed by the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation and the establishment of the 90,000 square kilometre Inuvialuit Settlement Region, among other concessions. The Inuvialuit Final Agreement resulted in a tiered land rights system, in which the Inuvialuit maintained first land rights over 13,000 square kilometres of the settlement region. The rest of the region's subsurface resources remained under the jurisdiction of the federal government. Although developers are guaranteed access to these resources, the Inuvialuit must be compensated for it through a negotiation process in which all parties set the terms and conditions of land use. Moreover, the agreement allows for Inuvialuit to extract their own resources through concession (Cassidy and Dale 1988:161). By 1986, Esso Resources Canada Ltd. reached a concession agreement with the Inuvialuit that included the newly formed Inuvialuit Petroleum Corporation, three years after a memorandum of understanding between the two was first established. Following this timeline, the terms of the Western Arctic Claims

Settlement Act were negotiated just one year after the oil company and the Indigenous community agreed to work together.

Whereas natural resource extraction companies were forced to negotiate with North American Indigenous groups with respect to their sovereign status, they could avoid negotiating the terms of a land use agreement if state recognition of Aboriginal inherent rights could be circumvented.<sup>2</sup> After bauxite aluminum ore was discovered in the Cape York area in the 1950s, the Queensland state government forcibly displaced Aboriginal peoples from their homes through the 1957 "Comalco Act" which revoked reserve status and awarded a 110 year mining lease to Rio Tinto Aluminum. In collusion with mining interests, the state police arrested and burned the homes of those who still remained in 1963. Those displaced peoples fought for return of lease lands culminating in the 1993 federal court proceedings, *Wik vs. the Peoples of Queensland*, arguing that the mining leases were invalid because the Queensland government breached fiduciary duties as a trustee to the *Wik* people by granting the mining leases (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission 1997).

Three years later, the Court determined that Native title could co-exist with pastoral leasing (as held by Comalco) culminating in the 2001 Western Cape Communities Coexistence Agreement between Indigenous groups with ancestral and historical ties to the lands, Comalco, and the Queensland Government. This ambitious agreement ensured that Comalco would continue its mining operations, while supporting regional Indigenous development (among other stipulations) through participation in bauxite mining operations. The Cape York Land Council Aboriginal Corporation was among the signers representing a consortium of tribal entities native to the region. Since then, the Traditional owners of the Western Cape York have been granted their claims to lands under lease by Rio Tinto Aluminum Limited. Its sister organization, Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation, serves as the policy and

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal battles to retain and regain sovereign title and rights to their ancestral lands were challenged by leaseholders of state lands supported by the common law premise that the acquisition of British sovereignty excludes preexisting Indigenous sovereign power.

business branch of the Cape York Aboriginal Trust, offering policy development, business consultation, financial management, and other services in pursuit of the Cape York Agenda, a comprehensive plan to combat passive welfare endemic to the region by staking a role in the “real” Australian economy (Pearson 2005:9).

### Mitigating Value Systems

Government mandated incorporation of Indigenous peoples into larger and larger political economic spheres characterized land claims settlements in the US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. These resolutions included diminished tracts of land, absolute or shared rights to surface or subsurface use, compensation for stolen or otherwise occupied lands, and a means to invest it through corporate organization integrating Indigenous peoples in the management of renewable and non-renewable resources. These processes shifted Indigenous peoples’ positions vis-a-vis natural resources on their ancestral lands; instead of bearing witness to outsiders developing local resources or even putting up obstacles it, they became facilitators.<sup>3</sup>

In the early days, Indigenous corporations did not possess the expertise to manage the capital acquired through land claims settlements. One report examining 93 Indigenous corporations in Australia identified governance ill suited to corporate goals, directors and staff who are unable to perform their duties, and conflicts of interest as the main causes of failure (Swansson 2010:5, 70). Another paper stated that half of Alaska Native corporations lost money throughout the 1980s, suggesting that had they originally invested their original capital in conservative stock and bonds, they would have instead shown steady gains over time. These analyses stated that Indigenous peoples initially lacked the adequate knowledge and experience to successfully take part in the global economy, with one stating that “the market values of regional resources were poorly understood by anyone, and the development of those resources,

even if development were desired, posed unknown risks” (McNabb 1992). As one shareholder of a bankrupt Alaska Native corporation put it, “If I was living in a big city and had \$100,000, I wouldn’t look for a subsistence hunter to go invest it for me” (Thompson 1999). A combination of inadequate business training, confidence, and the cultural capital necessary to succeed in a white man’s world stacked the odds against Indigenous corporate success in the early years.

Today, many Indigenous corporations are thriving, in part, because they overcame their obstacles by honing cross-cultural competency. Legislated incorporation in partnership with resource extraction industries pitted Indigenous conceptions of land use against Western attitudes towards it. It required Indigenous peoples to exploit resources they either viewed as inalienable, or else did not initially value as a commodity. Under this pressure, many Indigenous corporations operated against their communities’ core beliefs through their business practices, unaware of alternatives. Without an original business plan guiding capital accumulation to service the goals of incorporation (as with most business in general), most preferred to diversify their investments leading to the creation of industrial conglomerates with multiple divisions (Flanders 1989). Still, others used their settlements to provide jobs and improve infrastructure by investing in their local communities. Despite the wide range of business sectors impacted by Indigenous Corporate activities today, one factor has consistently impacted management and operations, stock ownership.

When corporations need to mitigate risk and raise capital, they sell stock. Indigenous shareholders cannot share their stock, nor can they transfer it out of tribal ownership. Indigenous corporate shareholders are made up of enrolled or recognized tribal members.<sup>4</sup> These shares cannot be exchanged on the free market (or sold to non-Natives), but they can be gifted to certain relatives, ostensibly retaining the corporations’ tribal interests in perpetuity. This arrangement, meant to ensure that Indigenous corpo-

3 Indigenous peoples did not become facilitators in all cases. There are plenty of occasions by which they protested (and continue to oppose) sub-surface development, but the land claims acts discussed in this essay were clearly intended to facilitate natural resource extraction in partnership with newly formed Indigenous economic organizations.

4 The way that Indigenous corporate shareholding works, however, risks external and internal slippage between the categories of race, ethnicity, political identity. Similarly, the public tends to stereotype Indigenous economic interests as “special interests” based on dominant racial schemas rather than an inherent political right.

rations reflect the wishes of their tribal shareholders – as they do business with non-Indigenous third parties while navigating non-Native politics and capital flows – requires Indigenous corporations to continuously negotiate between traditional value systems and those of the dominant state apparatus.<sup>5</sup> While commonly shared Indigenous values for egalitarianism, communal ownership, and stewardship appear to dovetail with Marxism’s vision for a socialist world order, outsiders often overlook the fact that many Indigenous societies also have internal systems of class, privatization, and accumulation (and redistribution) of excess wealth that can be understood as an alternative form of capitalism. These “Indigenous Capitalisms” overlap with both economic approaches in evolving and complex ways.

Just as Indigenous peoples often talk about “walking in two worlds,” mitigation between value systems is a constant facet of Indigenous corporate ethos, discourse and practice. Evidence of tough decisions made by corporate leaders that prefer one set of values over the other or else attempt to balance the two, prevail throughout corporate documents, activities and outcomes. The most difficult challenges pit diversified economic development over enculturated ways of making a living. There are many examples in which Indigenous corporations place the dollar above communally defined tribal interests, despoiling natural resources at the expense of balanced eco-systems intimately tied to lifestyles and worldviews. On the other hand, Indigenous communities enjoy the benefits of highly profitable but morally ambiguous ventures such as mining, logging, gaming, and corporate farming. In fact, several settlements stipulate that Indigenous corporations must invest a certain percentage of their earnings back into shareholder communities. Well-being improves as communities whose basic needs are met can use surplus corporate funds to support education, health, and emotionally satisfying cultural activities such as subsistence, the arts, ceremony, language, and passing on traditional knowledge.

While there is no single solution to the conflict between Indigenous and imperial neoliberal value

systems, Indigenous corporations have forged a middle ground, an Indigenous set of “best practices” that guide operations with respect to shareholders. As such, these corporations do not necessarily advocate Western ideals of “rational” economic action to maximize profits above all other objectives, nor do they practice welfare capitalism. They operate within the logic of Indigenous Capitalisms. As such, Indigenous corporations (many are non-profit) espouse the values of longevity and sustainability maintaining an accountability to community members, including those long passed and yet to be born. Most are committed to a holistic approach to business that considers ecological and cultural stewardship as important as making money.

Take the corporate objectives of Makivik Corporation (Canada):

To receive, administer, distribute and invest the compensation money payable to Nunavik Inuit, as provided for in the James Bay and Northern Quebec agreement; to relieve property, to promote the welfare, advancement, and education of the Inuit; to foster, promote, protect and assist in preserving the Inuit way of life, values and traditions; to exercise the functions vested in it by other Acts of the Agreement; and to develop and improve the Inuit communities and to improve their means of actions.

Wakatu Incorporation (Aotearoa/New Zealand):

We are Wakatū, we are a business of the land and the sea and we embrace our history and our *tikanga*. While we grow our business for the future, we honour and respect our past. We are always mindful of the way things were, the way things are, the way things should be. Our dream has a purpose and our dream has a history; we are Wakatū and we embrace our *tikanga*.

Gumala Aboriginal Corporation (Australia):

To alleviate poverty through proactive measures to achieve economic, social and community development while promoting and protecting the cultural values of the Traditional Owners.

<sup>5</sup> Certain aspects of traditional value systems are not necessarily incommensurate with dominant/Western ones.

Doyon Limited (Alaska, USA):

Doyon's mission is to continually enhance our position as a financially strong Native corporation in order to promote the economic and social well-being of our shareholders and future shareholders, to strengthen our Native way of life and to protect and enhance our land and resources.

And the preamble to Doyon's values:

The River ran through the lives of our grandparents; it runs through our lives; it will run through the lives of our grandchildren. . . A dynamic force masked by a static constancy, the River will speak to those who listen – our land speaks. Doyon values its relationship to the Place of our people: to our land, our culture, our way of life. We value our Place as the historical successor to our grandparents' ownership and stewardship of our land; as the fiduciary for our shareholders; as the trustee for our grandchildren's inheritance. We are intimately, subtly and profoundly connected to our Place – our corporate values flow from this sense of Place.

### **A Dual Promise of Subsumption and Self-Determination**

Indigenous Corporations take their missions seriously. They use their platforms to uphold Indigenous resources under threat. In 2009, Alaska Native regional corporation Bristol Bay Native Corporation (BBNC) voted against the impending development of Pebble Mine on nearby state lands citing the “unquantifiable impacts the project could have on the natural resources of the Bristol Bay region” (Juneau Empire 2009). The Pebble Limited Partnership, formed between England's Anglo American PLC and Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd, whose shareholders include Mitsubishi and (the aforementioned) Rio Tinto PLC, is poised to extract an estimated 94 million ounces of gold, 72 billion pounds of copper as well as molybdenum, silver, rhenium and palladium. If built, Pebble Mine will be America's largest gold and copper mine, situated at the headwaters of one of the world's richest salmon fishery. The potential long-term negative environmental impacts of this mining operation are catastrophic and probably unavoid-

able. BBNC president and CEO, Jason Metrokin, wrote, “a project of this perceived magnitude, in one of the world's most sensitive areas; and when the economy and cultural livelihood are so dependent on the renewable natural resources such as fish and game, is a project that our board feels is not worth the short-term gain. As an Alaska Native corporation, our timeline is in terms of generations so after almost 40 years of doing business we feel that we have only just begun” (Lavrakas 2010). Five Alaska Native village corporations representing the communities closest to the mine protested the vote. One village CEO wrote in an email, “We have no idea why BBNC took this approach. . . Does BBNC intend to continue to pursue mineral development on their lands with Bristol Bay? Why were we not consulted before BBNC made this decision on Pebble when we actively work with Pebble?” While it may appear that this village corporation is colluding with the Pebble Mine developers in respect to their own potential stakes in it, making sense of this statement requires remembering that ANCSA only granted subsurface land rights to regional corporations. Whose values are at stake in this situation in which regional and village corporations do not see eye to eye? Have the village corporations in opposition to BBNC's stance forgotten their ancestral dependence on healthy salmon fisheries, or are they looking forward to new cash jobs in an undiversified region?

A Marxist perspective might analyze this situation as evidence for subsumption, that the village corporation has been cannibalized by the functions of capital, while the regional corporation struggles against it. Legislative acts to settle land claims injected capital into Indigenous relations of production, ensuring that outside corporate interests must negotiate with newly formed Indigenous corporations. As these corporations became better and better at investing in more and more diverse sectors from military security to agritech, they widened their economic reach (capital growth). These processes abstract cultural understandings of the relationships between the environment, economy, social life and spirituality threatening Indigenous ontologies. For example, an arctic subsistence hunter understands his place in relation to the environment (provides

for material needs), food he eats (economy), his community (food distribution), and spirituality (explains these relationships and proscribes ways to keep them in balance). The hunter, a shareholder of an Indigenous corporation, on the other hand, may receive a dividend for surplus earnings made from investments in a Mexican manufacturing firm and a telecommunications merger, abstracting the relationships between economy, social life and spirituality. The deep division between what is culturally understood as holistic and the processes of interpellation to the rules and systems of late capitalism mediated by the state, tears apart Indigenous understandings of how the world works.

Though not entirely incommensurate with a Marxist viewpoint, an Indigenous Capitalisms approach sees corporate praxis in terms of potential empowerment. By engaging in late capitalist production, Indigenous Corporations can use political clout acquired through the accumulation of large amounts of capital to support self-determination through a strategy to “beat the systems in power at their own game.”<sup>6</sup> Once these corporations and their shareholders have gained the cultural and emotional capital “do well” by the standards of the settler colonial state and its corporate collaborators, will they have lost something inherently “Indigenous”? Does success come at the cost of internal colonization? The answers to these questions do not fit within an “either/or” binary. James Clifford shared his ideas about this issue in a 2009 lecture given to the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania.

At one pole, familiar kinds of world-system functionalism say, in effect, ‘if any alternate social or cultural forces exist that do not *transform* the system they must be *part* of the system.’ This system-centered view certainly accounts for part of what’s being articulated and performed in recent claims for Indigenous sociocultural diversity. But it wipes away all the local histories of social negotiation and struggle, transformative continuity and place-based living, denying them any meaningful historical momentum in the contemporary moment. [Clifford 2009:247]

Looking at the events surrounding the overlaps of different economic spheres through the lens of Indigenous Capitalism can help illuminate the complex interstices between cross-cultural forces at play (and if it is truly wrestling with the nature of reality, it will probably result in more questions than answers).

Indigenous Capitalisms acknowledges that although most of the world’s Indigenous peoples have been integrated into regulated cash economies through colonization, many have maintained an internal logic of accumulation, exchange and circulation of wealth that corresponds with other aspects of social life. These worldviews emerged from a subsistence economy “premised on an ethos of reciprocity in which people reciprocate not only with one another, but also with the land and spirit world” (Kuokkanen 2011:220). These internal logics have been challenged through assimilative and genocidal acts over the past five hundred years, the latest posed by the lures of wealth made possible through (seemingly beneficial) laws and policies that enable (and force) Indigenous peoples to organize their economic futures around neoliberal corporate capitalism. Toggling back and forth between the dialectics of internal value systems and those that drive dominant political economies, Indigenous corporations can provide new pathways for nation-building and self-determination, but they could also be harbingers of partial or total subsumption. As such, tribal members feel ambivalence towards many Indigenous corporate activities. Like the shareholders of financial institutions trading derivatives and managing hedge funds before the 2008 global financial collapse, sometimes Indigenous shareholders want the big pay out now regardless of future costs. They like benefits afforded through the excess accumulation of capital in the form of dividends, scholarships, programs that support language and heritage, branding campaigns that redress negative stereotypes, and structural improvements that upgrade homes, office buildings, schools and community gathering places. However, many continue to rally against pressures to abandon traditional worldviews in favour of corporate values, workplaces, and operations.

The logic of Indigenous Capitalisms acknowledges that Indigenous corporations bear the

6 Jessica Cattellino makes a similar argument in her 2008 book, *High Stakes: Florida Gaming and Sovereignty*.

continued pressures of assimilation to the global marketplace, but they also carry a promise for decolonized futures. Indigenous Capitalisms operate within the dominant paradigm that determines some, but not all of the social relations of exchange. Self-proclaimed “traditionalists” who fight against incorporation argue that exploitation, at the heart of Marxist notions of capitalism, contradicts a worldview shared by many Indigenous peoples to take what you need and share with others. This stance, however, willfully ignores Indigenous moral economies about the accumulation and redistribution of wealth that are integrated into Indigenous corporate missions.

Indigenous law, culture, kinship, and behavioural norms have always been embedded within Indigenous corporations (although at particular times it is more or less visible to outsiders). Traditional forms of kinship are integral to human resources departments and business transactions. Business activities are trumped by important cultural events. The tone and nature of internal communications do not necessarily match the kinds of domineering and masculine speech patterns that pervade in Western business places. Indigenous Corporations operate non-revenue generating branches dedicated to education, language the arts, and the stewardship of natural resources. While they may not result in immediate profit, these organizational arms are integrated into overall fiscal goals and result in new practices that locate different kinds of profit in new ways, such as through cultural branding, developing sustainable products, or investing in youth.

Whereas culturally-based modes of production reinforce local value systems within corporate philosophy, organization and practice, self-determination within the current world system can only be achieved through outside acceptance codified into international law. Federal acts mandating Indigenous incorporation have a dual potential for simultaneous subsumption and self-determination. The irony of this equation is that self-determination depends on being able to prove to the world that a given Indigenous community differs from the rest of the multicultural body politic residing in the surrounding nation state through inherent rights vested in their continuous historical relationship to their

lands. Corporate engagements with Indigenous lands through natural resource extraction threatens the legitimization of traditional use and alienates Indigenous shareholders from social and moral economies upon which their sovereignty is based. The future of self-determination lies in international law that recognizes the ongoing (but in some cases shifting) relationships between Indigenous peoples and their lands and establishes Indigenous peoples as legal actors on the international stage to whom states and other international legal actors owe legal duties and obligations.

The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes “the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources,” and affirms “the fundamental importance of the right to self-determination of all peoples, by virtue of which they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” In 2010, President Barak Obama reversed the Bush administration’s opposition to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples becoming the last nation to adopt it after Canada, New Zealand and Australia had also reversed their votes against it.<sup>7</sup> In the future, this document will likely be called upon to combat the adverse consequences of the international legal order’s validation of these imperial powers’ ongoing forms of subjugation through assimilation by neoliberalism.

### A Call to Action

We cannot begin to unpack and translate the internal logic of Indigenous Capitalisms as they operate at various levels of political economies without understanding how they relate to the cultural values intertwined in the everyday lives of Indigenous peoples. Nor can we ignore the continued impact of colonial interventions on the decisions that

<sup>7</sup> See Valerie Richardson. Obama adopts U.N. manifesto on rights of indigenous peoples. *The Washington Times*. December 16, 2010.

Indigenous community members and business leaders make today. An Indigenous Capitalisms viewpoint departs from a Western framework that often touts “one size fits all” solutions to social and economic problems without taking into consideration the particular ways that colonial pasts come to bear upon contemporary Indigenous communities.

This essay speaks to the economic relations within Indigenous communities, and between them and the rest of the world through the concept of Indigenous Capitalisms. It is written to raise more questions than it answers, and to call for continued applied scholarly engagement. Building a theory of Indigenous Capitalisms is key to the goals of Indigenous Studies. As Duane Champagne remarked,

Indigenous studies lends itself to a wide variety of comparative analysis and case studies about colonialism, economic development, political autonomy, culture change and continuity, and changing international relations. ... There may be over 375 million Indigenous peoples in the world, and they often have issues in common with other Indigenous communities over relations with nation states and national cultures. [2009:88]

Future research in this area should offer new ways of understanding the ties between economic issues and Indigenous lives, challenging existing stereotypes about Indigenous peoples’ stakes in the global economy contributing to the growing discipline of Indigenous Studies. This research can borrow theoretical tools and analytics from many fields including anthropology, cultural studies, economics, and political science, but it should take an Indigenous Studies perspective that does not necessarily follow the same set of assumptions put forth in mainstream academy (such as models of linear progression, rational-actor,

atheism/Judeo-Christianity, nation-state, world systems, etc.). In doing so, this field of inquiry can reach out to the mainstream as we see more and more non-Indigenous corporations and governments working together to implement “new” ideas for sustainability and long term planning.

Areas of research could include, but are not limited to, considerations of the cross-cultural interplay between moral economies, structures of power, gender, law, and governance. Land claims acts that impose assimilative development structures need to be closely monitored for potential slippages that may alienate Indigenous peoples from their inherent rights and assets. This research should attend to the future role of traditional and subsistence economies in relation to other spheres of Indigenous lives. This research should have practical applications by helping to identify best practices, new areas for entrepreneurship, models for effective governance, and enhanced educational opportunities. This area of study should extend beyond this essay’s brief discussion of corporations in Anglo settler colonial nations to include other Indigenous peoples operating under other sets of moral, legal and political constraints. It should recognize the non-linear relationship between the past and the future, as well as the beyond-spatial interpenetrations between the local and global to see Indigenous Capitalisms as a tool to analyze a wide range of issues salient to Indigenous worldviews. Finally, it should question the nature of reality itself; an Indigenous Capitalisms approach imposes the questions, “For what end do I labour? What defines happiness? Is identity individual or collective? What is the relationship of humans to the animals, plants, rocks and other elements with whom we share the planet?” and even, “What does it mean to be Indigenous in the twenty-first century?”

## References

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission  
1997 The Ten Point Plan in Wik and Native Title: Issues for Indigenous Peoples. Electronic document, [http://www.atsic.gov.au/issues/land/native\\_title/10\\_point\\_WIK\\_plan.asp](http://www.atsic.gov.au/issues/land/native_title/10_point_WIK_plan.asp).
- Altman, Jon  
2010 What Future for Remote Indigenous Australia? Economic Hybridity and the Neoliberal Turn. *In* Culture Crisis: Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia. Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, eds. Pp. 259-280. Sydney: University of South Wales Press.
- Bunten, Alexis Celeste  
2010 More Like Ourselves: Indigenous Capitalism Through Tourism. *American Indian Quarterly*. 34(3): 285-311.
- Calliou, Brian  
2005 The Culture of Leadership: North American Indigenous Leadership in a Changing Economy. *In* Indigenous Peoples and the Modern State. Duane Champagne, Karen Jo Torjesen, and Susan Steiner, eds. Pp. 47-68. Walnut Creek: AltaMira.
- Cassidy, Frank and Dale, Norman  
1988 After Native Claims? The Implications of Comprehensive Claims Settlements for Natural Resources in British Columbia. The Institute for Research on Public Policy. Victoria: Morriss Printing.
- Cattelino, Jessica  
2008 High Stakes: Florida Gaming and Sovereignty. Durham: Duke University Press.  
2010 The Double Bind of American Indian Need-Based Sovereignty. *Cultural Anthropology*. 25(2):235-262.
- Champagne, Duane  
2007 Social Change and Cultural Continuity Among Native Nations. Plymouth: Alta Mira Press.
- Clifford, James  
2009 Hau'ofa's Hope Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania 2009 Distinguished Lecture. University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Flanders, Nicholas  
1989 The Alaska Native Corporation as Conglomerate: The Problem of Profitability. *Human Organization* 48(4):299-312.
- Foley, David  
2000 Successful Indigenous Australian Entrepreneurs: a Case Study Analysis. Brisbane: Merino Lithographics.  
2006 Indigenous Australian Entrepreneurs: Not Community and Not in the Outback. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Research, The Australian National University.  
2007 Indigenous (Australian) Entrepreneurship: WHAT, WHEN, HOW and WHY? Regional Frontiers Conference Papers. Swinburne University: Melbourne.
- Gomes, Alberto  
2004 Looking for Money: Capitalism and Modernity In an Orang Asli Village. Victoria: Trans Pacific Press.
- Halcro, Andrew  
2009 Native 8(a) Federal Contracts: The Real Story. Alaska Dispatch: News and Voices from the Last Frontier. September 8. Electronic document, <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/native-8a-federal-contracts-real-story>.
- Harmon, Alexandra  
2010 Rich Indians: Native People and the Problem of Wealth in American History. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Heather, Ben.  
2009 Ngai Tahu Stung By "Volatile Climate." The Southland Times, October 29, 2009. Electronic document, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/southland-times/news/3008538/Ngai-Tahu-stung-by-volatile-climate>
- Hindle, Kevin, Robert B. Anderson, Robert J. Gibson, and Bob Kayseas  
2005 Relating Practice to Theory in Indigenous Entrepreneurship: A Pilot Investigation of the Kitsaki Partnership Portfolio. *American Indian Quarterly* Volume 25 (no 1 and 2):1-23
- Jameson, Fredric.  
1991 Postmodernism or the Logic of Late Capitalism (Post Contemporary Interventions). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Juneau Empire  
2009 Bristol Bay Native Corporation opposes Pebble Mine. Juneau Empire, December 14. Electronic document, [http://juneauempire.com/stories/121409/sta\\_535641806.shtml](http://juneauempire.com/stories/121409/sta_535641806.shtml).

- Kuokkanen, Rauna  
 2011 Indigenous Economies, Theories, Subsistence, and Women. Exploring the Social Economy Model for Indigenous Governance. *American Indian Quarterly* 35(2):215-240.
- Lafleur, Jennifer and Michael Grabell  
 2011 Villages Testify to Disparities in Benefits Alaska Native Corporations Provide. *ProPublica* March 17, 2011. Electronic document, <http://www.propublica.org/article/villages-testify-to-disparity-in-benefits-alaska-native-corporations>.
- Lavrakas, Dimitra  
 2010 Speaking Out on Pebble. *First Alaskans, a Statewide Magazine of Native Business, Culture and Lifestyle*, February/March. Electronic document, <http://www.firstalaskansmagazine.com/index.php?issue=02-2010&story=pebble>.
- Mason, Arthur  
 2002 The Rise of an Alaska Native Bourgeoisie. *Etudes/Inuit/Studies* 26(2):5-22.
- McNabb, Steven  
 1992 Native Claims in Alaska; A Twenty Year Review. *Etudes/ Inuit Studies* 16(1-2):85-95.
- Ngai Tahu Holdings Group  
 2011 Media Release. Ngai Tahu Holdings-Partners With Global Giants April 15, 2011. Electronic document, <http://www.nzx.com/markets/NZSX/PGW/announcements/4899839/NGAI-TAHU-HOLDINGS-PARTNERS-WITH-GLOBAL-GIANTS>.
- Petrie, Hazel  
 2007 *Chiefs of Industry: Māori Tribal Enterprise in Early Colonial New Zealand*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- Pearson, Noel  
 2005 *The Cape York Agenda. "Fundamental Transformation Through Radical Reform"* Cape York Institute for Policy & Leadership: Cairns, Australia.
- Spiller, Chellie, Ljiljana Erakovic, Manuka Henare and Edwina Pio  
 2010 Relational Well-Being and Wealth: Māori Businesses and an Ethic of Care. *Journal of Business Ethics* 98(1):153-169.
- Swansson, James  
 2010 *Analyzing Key Characteristics in Indigenous Corporate Failure*. Research Paper. Commonwealth of Australia. Australian Government Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations.
- Thompson, Lori  
 1999 Bering Straits: Recovering. *The Juneau Empire*, January 22. Electronic document, [http://juneauempire.com/stories/012299/Loc\\_bering.html](http://juneauempire.com/stories/012299/Loc_bering.html).
- Tripp, Charles  
 2006 *Islam and the Moral Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vaknin, Sam  
 2005 The Capitalist Experiment in Eastern Europe. *Global Politician*. June 8. Electronic Document, <http://globalpolitician.com/2843-economics-eastern-europe>.
- Wiketera, Keri-Ann and Hamish Bremner  
 2009 Maori Cultural Tourism or Just Being Ourselves? Validating Cultural Inheritance. *London Journal of Tourism, Sport and Creative Industries, Special Edition, Current Themes in Indigenous Tourism*. Alexis Bunten and Nelson Graburn, eds. 2(1): 53-61.
- Whittington, Michael S  
 1986 *Native Economic Development Corporations: Political and Economic Change in Canada's North*. Canadian Arctic Resources Committee, CARC Policy Paper 4.
- Yanagisako, Silvia  
 2002 *Producing Culture and Capital: Family Firms in Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.