

On the Importance of Being Tribal

Tribal wisdom

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Tribal people hold endless fascination for us moderns. We imagine them as exotics trapped in a lyrical past, or as charming anachronisms embarking on the inevitable course toward modernity. What few of us realize is that tribal peoples have not tried (and failed) to be like us, but have actually chosen to live differently. It is critical that we examine the roads they took that we did not; only then can we get a clear insight into the choices we ourselves make and the price we pay for them—alienation, loneliness, disintegrating families, ecological destruction, spiritual famishment. Only then can we consider the possibility of modifying some of those choices to enrich our lives.

In studying tribal societies, as I have for 30 years, we learn that there is no single “tribal” way of life—I use the word here as a kind of shorthand to refer to small-scale, preindustrial societies that live in comparative isolation and manage their affairs without a central authority such as the state. But however diverse, such societies do share certain characteristics that make them different from “modern” societies. By studying the dramatic contrasts between these two kinds of societies, we see vividly the consequences of modernization and industrialization. Modernization has changed our thinking about every facet of our lives, from family relationships to spirituality to our importance as individuals. Has ours been the road best traveled?

Strange Relations

The heart of the difference between the modern world and the traditional one is that in traditional societies people are a valuable resource and the interrelations between them are carefully tended; in modern society things are the valuables and people are all too often treated as disposable.

In the modern world we shroud our interdependency in an ideology of independence. We focus on individuals, going it alone in the economic sphere, rather than persons, interconnected in the social sphere. As French anthropologist Marcel Mauss put

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it, "It is our Western societies that have recently turned man into an economic animal." What happened?

A truly revolutionary change—a social revolution centering on the rights of the individual—swept Western Europe during the Renaissance and eventually came to dominate and define the modern world. While traditional societies had denounced individualism as anti-social, in Western Europe a belief in the rights and dignity of the individual slowly came to be regarded as the most important aspect of society itself.

The glorification of the individual, this focus on the dignity and rights of the individual, this severing of the obligations to kin and community that support and constrain the individual in traditional societies—all this was the sociological equivalent of splitting the atom. It unleashed the human energy and creativity that enabled people to make extraordinary technical advances and to accumulate undreamed-of wealth.

But we have paid a price for our success. The ever-expanding modern economy is a driven economy, one that survives by creating new needs so that people will consume more. Ideally, under the mechanics of this system, people should have unlimited needs so that the economy can expand forever, and advertising exists to convince them of just that. *

The driven economy is accompanied by a restless and driven society. In the United States, for example, the educational system teaches children to be competitive and tries to instill in them the hunger for personal achievement. As adults, the most driven people are rewarded by status. Other human capabilities—for kindness, generosity, patience, tolerance, cooperation, compassion—all the qualities one might wish for in one's family and friends, are literally undervalued: Any job that requires such talents usually has poor pay and low prestige.

The tendency of modern society to isolate the individual is nowhere more clearly evident than in the modern family. In the West we speak of young people growing up, leaving their parents, and "starting a family." To most of the world, including parts of Europe, this notion seems strange. Individuals do not start families, they are born into them and stay in them until death or even beyond. In those societies you cannot leave your family without becoming a social misfit, a person of no account.

When the modern system works, it provides a marvelous release for individual creativity and emotion; when it does not, it causes a lot of personal pain and social stress. It is, characteristically, an optimistic system, hoping for and betting on the best. In contrast, traditional societies have settled for more cautious systems, designed to make life tolerable and to avoid the worst. Americans, in their version of the modern family, are free to be themselves at the risk of ultimate loneliness. In traditional family systems the individual may be suffocated but is never unsupported. Is there a middle way?

Finding that middle way is not a problem that tribal societies have to face, at least not unless they find their way of life overwhelmed by the outside world. They normally get on with the business of bringing up children against a background of consensus about what should be done and how, which means that they can also be more relaxed about who does the bringing up. Children may spend as much time with other adults as they do with their parents, or, as in the Xavante tribe of central Brazil, they may wander around in a flock that is vaguely supervised by whichever adults happen to be nearby. As soon as Xavante babies are old enough to toddle, they attach

themselves to one of the eddies of children that come and go in the village. There they are socialized by their peers. The older kids keep an eye on the younger ones and teach them their place in the pecking order. Of course there are squabbles and scraps, and one often sees a little child who has gotten the worst of it wobbling home and yelling furiously. The child's parents never do what parents in our society often do—go out and remonstrate with the children in an attempt to impose some kind of adult justice (often leaving the children with a burning sense of unfairness). Instead they simply comfort the child and let her return to the fold as soon as her bruised knee or battered ego permits. At the same time, there is never any bullying among the Xavante children who are left to police themselves.

The Xavante system represents an informal dilution of parents' everyday responsibilities. In many societies these responsibilities are formally transferred to other relatives. In the Pacific Islands, for example, it is quite common for children to be raised by their parents' kin. Among the Trobriand Islanders, this is seen as useful for the child, since it expands his or her network of active kin relationships without severing ties to the biological parents. If children are unhappy, they can return to their true parents. If they are contented, they remain with their adoptive parents until adulthood.

Tribal societies also differ from the modern in their approach to raising teenagers. The tribal transition to maturity is made cleanly and is marked with great ceremony. In Western societies families dither over their often resentful young, suggesting that they may be old enough but not yet mature enough, mature enough but not yet secure enough, equivocating and putting adolescents through an obstacle course that keeps being prolonged.

Tribal initiation rites have always held a special interest for outside observers, who have been fascinated by their exotic and especially by their sexual aspects. It is the pain and terror of such initiations that make the deepest impression, and these are most frequently inflicted on boys, who are in the process of being taken out of the women's world and brought into that of the men. Some Australian Aboriginal groups peel the penis like a banana and cut into the flesh beneath the foreskin. Some African groups cut the face and forehead of the initiate in such a way as to leave deep scars.

Circumcision is, of course, the commonest of all initiation procedures. Its effect on the boy is, however, intensified in some places by an elaborate concern with his fortitude during the operation. The Maasai of East Africa, whose *morani* or warriors are world famous as epitomes of courage and bravado, closely watch a boy who is being circumcised for the slightest sign of cowardice. Even an involuntary twitch could make him an object of condemnation and scorn.

Initiation rituals are intended to provoke anxiety. They act out the death and rebirth of the initiate. His old self dies, and while he is in limbo he learns the mysteries of his society—instruction that is enhanced by fear and deprivation and by the atmosphere of awe that his teachers seek to create. In some societies that atmosphere is enhanced by the fact that the teachers are anonymous, masked figures representing the spirits. The lesson is often inscribed unforgettably on his body as well as in his mind. Later (the full cycle of ceremonies may last weeks or even months) he is reborn as an adult, often literally crawling between the legs of his sponsor to be reborn of man into the world of men.

Girls' initiation ceremonies are as dramatically marked in some societies as those of boys. Audrey Richards' account of the *chisungu*, a month-long initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia, describes the complex ritual that does not so much add to the girl's practical knowledge as inculcate certain attitudes—a respect for age, for senior women and men, for the mystical bonds between husband and wife, for what the Bemba believe to be the dangerous potentials of sex, fire, and blood. The initiate learns the secret names of things and the songs and dances known only to women. She is incorporated into the group of women who form her immediate community, since this is a society that traces descent in the female line and a husband moves to his wife's village when they marry. Western writers tend to assume that it is more important for boys to undergo separation from their mothers as they mature than it is for girls. But the Bemba stress that mothers must surrender their daughters in the *chisungu* to the community at large (and to the venerable mistress of ceremonies in particular) as part of a process through which they will eventually gain sons-in-law.

The ceremony Richards observed for the initiation of three girls included 18 separate events, some 40 different pottery models (shaped for the occasion and destroyed immediately afterward), nearly a hundred songs, and numerous wall paintings and dances, all used to instruct the girls in their new status. All of this represents a large investment of time and resources. The initiation gives girls a strong sense of the solidarity and powers of women in a society that also stresses male authority and female submissiveness.

Ever since the influential work of Margaret Mead, there has been a tendency in the West to assume that, if growing up is less stressful in tribal societies, it is because they are less puritanical about sex. The modern world has, however, undergone a sexual revolution since Mead was writing in the 1930s and 1940s, and it does not seem to have made growing up much easier. I think that, in our preoccupation with sex, we miss the point. Take the case of tribal initiations. They not only make it clear to the initiates (and to the world at large) that they are now mature enough to have sex and to have children; the clarity also serves to enable the individual to move with a fair degree of certainty through clearly demarcated stages of life.

A Moral Economy

Since earliest times, the exchange of gifts has been the central mechanism through which human beings relate to one another. The reason is that the essence of a gift is obligation. A person who gives a gift compels the recipient either to make a return gift or to reciprocate in some other way. Obligation affects the givers as well. It is not entirely up to them whether or when to bestow a gift. Even in the modern world, which prides itself on its pragmatism, people are expected to give gifts on certain occasions—at weddings, at childbirth, at Christmas, and so on. People are expected to invite others to receive food and drink in their houses and those so invited are expected to return the favor.

In traditional societies, it is gifts that bond people to one another and make society work. It follows that in such societies a rich person is not somebody who accumulates

wealth in money and goods but rather somebody who has a large network of people beholden to him. Such networks are the instrument through which prominent people can demonstrate their prestige. They are also the safety net that sees an individual through the crises of life.

In modern societies these networks have shrunk, just as the family continues to shrink. There are fewer and fewer people to whom we feel obligated and, more ominously, fewer and fewer who feel obligated to us. When we think of a safety net, when our politicians speak of it, we refer to arrangements made by abstract entities—the state, the corporation, the insurance company, the pension fund—entities we would not dream of giving presents to; entities we hope will provide for us (and fear they will not).

Traditional societies operate a moral economy, that is, an economy permeated by personal and moral considerations. In such a system, exchanges of goods in the “market” are not divorced from the personal relationships between those who exchange. On the contrary, the exchanges define those relationships. People who engage in such transactions select exchange partners who display integrity and reliability so that they can go back to them again and again. Even when cash enters such an economy, it does not automatically transform it. People still look for just prices, not bargain prices, and the system depends on trust and interdependence. In traditional societies the motto is “seller beware,” for a person who gouges or shortchanges will become a moral outcast, excluded from social interaction with other people.

An Ecology of Mind

The sense of disconnection so characteristic of modern life affects not only the relations between people but equally importantly the relations between people and their environment. As a result, we may be gradually making the planet uninhabitable. The globe is warming up and is increasingly polluted. We cannot take fresh air or clean water for granted anymore. Even our vast oceans are starting to choke on human garbage. The rain forests are burning. The ozone layer is being depleted at rates that constantly exceed our estimates.

How have we come to this? A hundred years ago science seemed to hold such promising possibilities. But the scientific advances of the 19th century were built on the notion that human beings would master nature and make it produce more easily and plentifully for them. Medieval Christianity also taught that human beings, although they might be sinners, were created in God's image to have dominion over this earth. Whether human dominion was guaranteed by the Bible or by science, the result was the same—the natural world was ours to exploit.

Tribal societies, by contrast, have always had a strong sense of the interconnectedness of things on this earth and beyond. For example, human beings have, for the greater part of the history of our species on this earth, lived by hunting and gathering. Yet peoples who lived by hunting and gathering did not—and do not to this day—consider themselves the lords of creation. On the contrary, they are more likely to believe in (and work hard to maintain) a kind of reciprocity between human beings and the species they are obliged to hunt for food.

The reciprocity between hunter and hunted is elaborately expressed in the ideas of the Makuna Indians of southeastern Colombia. The Makuna believe that human beings, animals, and all of nature are parts of the same One. Their ancestors were fish people who came ashore along the rivers and turned into people. Out of their bodies or by their actions these ancestors created everything in the world, the hills and forests, the animals and the people. They carved out river valleys by pushing their sacred musical instruments in front of them.

People, animals, and fish all share the same spiritual essence and so, the Makuna say, animals and fish live in their own communities, which are just like human communities. They have their chiefs, their shamans, their dance houses, birth houses, and "waking up houses" (places where they originally came into being as species). They have their songs and dances and their material possessions. Above all, animals and fish are just like humans because they wear ritual ornaments, consume spirit foods—coca, snuff, and the hallucinogenic brew called *yage*—and use the sacred *yurupari* instruments in their ceremonies. When shamans blow over coca, snuff, and other spirit foods during human ceremonies, they are offering them to the animal people. When human beings dance in this world, the shaman invites the animal people to dance in theirs. If humans do not dance and shamans do not offer spirit food to the animal people, the animals will die out and there will be no more game left in this world.

Thus when the fish are spawning, they are actually dancing in their birth houses. That is why it is particularly dangerous to eat fish that have been caught at the spawning places, for then one eats a person who is ceremonially painted and in full dance regalia. A human being who does this or enters a fish house by mistake will sicken and die, for his soul will be carried away to the houses of the fish people.

It is clear that Makuna beliefs have specific ecological consequences. The sacredness of salt licks and fish-spawning places, the careful reciprocity between humans and their fellow animals and fish, all mediated by respected shamans, guarantee that the Makuna manage their environment and do not plunder it. The Swedish anthropologist Kaj Arhem, an authority on the Makuna, describes their ecological practices and cosmological speculations as an "ecosophy," where the radical division between nature and culture, humans and animals—so characteristic of Western thought—dissolves.

Arhem suggests that we need an ecosophy of our own, imbued with moral commitment and emotional power, if we are to protect the resources on which we depend and ensure not only our own survival but also that of our fellow creatures on this earth.

We, on the other hand, tend to forget our environment except when we want to extract wealth from it or use it as the backdrop for a scenic expedition. Then we take what we want. There is no compact, none of the reciprocity so characteristic of tribal societies. For the most part we mine the earth and leave it, for we do not feel we belong to it. It belongs to us. This rootlessness and the waste that goes with it are particularly shocking to traditional societies.

The Indians of the western United States were outraged by the way in which the invaders of their territories squandered the resources that they themselves used so sparingly. The Indians on the plains lived off the buffalo, killing only as many as they needed and using every bit of the dead animals. They ate the meat, made tents and

clothes from the hides, and used the bones to make arrow straighteners, bows, mallets, even splints for setting fractures. They made butter from the marrow fat and cords from the sinews. When the white buffalo hunters came, it was more than an invasion. It was a sacrilege. These men slaughtered the herds with their powerful rifles, often taking only the tongue to eat and leaving the rest of the animal to rot.

The deep sadness of the Indians over this slaughter was expressed in a speech attributed to Chief Seattle, after whom the city of Seattle is named, believed to have been delivered in 1854 to an assembly of tribes preparing to sign away their lands under duress to the white man. Some contend the speech was actually written by a Texas speechwriter in 1971. Whatever their origin, these moving words convey an environmental and spiritual ethic that most tribal people share. They speak as much to us about our own predicament as they did to Chief Seattle's fellow chiefs about their defeated civilization. "What is man without the beasts?" he asked. "If all the beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected. ... We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his fathers' graves behind, and he does not care. He kidnaps the earth from his children. He does not care. His fathers' graves and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert."

Touching the Timeless

Modern society is intensely secular. Even those who regret this admit it. Social theorists tend to assume that modernization is itself a process of secularization that has not only undermined people's religious beliefs but has also deprived them of their spirituality. In the industrial nations of the West many of the people who believe in God do not expect to come into close contact with the divine, except after death—and some of them are not too sure about it even then.

Indeed, it seems that those who live in the secular and industrialized West are already searching for ways to fill the vacuum in their lives left by "organized" religion and the numbing delights of mass society. We live in a world that prides itself on its modernity yet is hungry for wholeness, hungry for meaning. At the same time it is a world that marginalizes the very impulses that might fill this void. The pilgrimage toward the divine, the openness to knowledge that transcends ordinary experience, the very idea of feeling at one with the universe are impulses we tolerate only at the fringes of our society.

It seems that we denigrate our capacity to dream and so condemn ourselves to live in a disenchanted world. Shorn of the knowledge that we are part of something greater than ourselves, we also lose the sense of responsibility that comes with it. It is this connectedness that tribal societies cherish. Yet for modern society, this is a bond we

cannot bring ourselves to seek. But if we do not listen to other traditions, do not even listen to our inner selves, then what will the future hold for our stunted and overconfident civilization?

The Tightrope of Power

Meanwhile, this civilization of ours, at once so powerful and so insecure, rolls like a juggernaut over societies that have explored the very solutions that might help us save ourselves. We do so in the name of progress, insisting all too often that we offer science, truth, plenty, and social order to peoples who lack these things. Yet the contrast between tribal societies and the centralized states that prey on them is not one of order and disorder, violence and peace. It is instead a contrast between societies in which no one has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and others in which those rights are vested in a state. The 20th century has been one of the bloodiest in history, not only because of the wars between countries employing weapons of mass destruction but also because modern technology has been used by ruthless rulers to cow their own subjects. Hitler and Stalin are only the most notorious examples of dictators who directed violence against their own people in the name of the state. There are literally scores of shooting wars going on at the moment, most of them between states and their own subjects.

The state guarantees order, or is supposed to. Force, the monopoly of the government, is applied massively but, once the system is in place, relatively invisibly. Its victims are hidden in concentration camps or banished to Siberias. In many places today, the victims simply disappear.

It seems that people will often acquiesce in despotism for fear of anarchy. Recent history seems to indicate that the most advanced countries are more afraid of anarchy than they are of oppression. The Russians, whose whole history is a struggle to create order on the open steppes of Eurasia, have a fear of disorder (which they call *besporyadok*, the condition of not being "lined up") that has frequently led them to accept tyranny. At the other extreme, the United States, whose whole history is a determination to avoid despotism, allows more internal chaos than most other industrial nations. It values individual freedom to the point of allowing private citizens to own arsenals of weapons and puts up with a rate of interpersonal violence that would be considered catastrophic in other countries.

It seems that human beings are everywhere searching for the right balance between the mob and the dictator, between chaos and tyranny, between the individual and society. Industrial societies give a monopoly of power to the state in exchange for a guarantee of peace. We take this social order for granted to the extent that we tend to assume that there is anarchy and perpetual warfare in tribal societies. What we do not realize is that such societies are acutely conscious of the fragility of the social order and of the constant effort needed to maintain it. Paradoxically, the people who live in societies that do not have formal political institutions are more political than those who do since it is up to each individual to make sure that the system works, indeed to ensure that the system continues to exist at all. Tribal people avoid the perils of anarchy only through constant and unremitting effort.

Elijah Harper, an Ojibwa-Cree who is a member of parliament in the Canadian province of Manitoba, contrasted the democratic procedures of the native Canadians he represented with those of the Canadian government that was trying to push through a revision of Canada's constitution. The new constitution was designed to respond to Quebec's demand to be considered a distinct society within Canada, with appropriate protection for its own language and culture. Harper used parliamentary procedure to block the constitutional change, on the grounds that native Canadians had been asking for similar consideration for years without getting a hearing. A new round of discussions concerning the revision of Canada's constitution is now taking place and this time the rights of Canada's "first nations," the aboriginal peoples, are also on the agenda.

The Canadian crisis makes clear what is only dimly perceived in other countries, namely that the destiny of the majority in any state is intimately linked to the fate of its minorities. The failure of the first attempt to change their constitution has forced Canadians to think about what kind of society they want theirs to be. These are the same questions that the Aborigines are trying to put on the Australian agenda and that the Indians are forcing Brazilians to think about as they protest against the rape of Amazonian regions.

It is not only in authoritarian states that questions arise about how people within a state are allowed to go about their business. The dramatic events in Eastern Europe, however, have led some people to think so. Once the heavy hand of Communist dictatorship was lifted, the nations of Eastern Europe started to unravel. Old ethnic loyalties surfaced and ethnic rivalries threaten to dismember one nation after another. The problem in Eastern Europe is not that it is made up of more peoples than states, but rather that the states have not been successful in working out political solutions that could enable those peoples to live together amicably. But neither do democratic regimes find it easy to create more imaginative solutions that allow diverse groups of people to live together.

The reason for this failure is that such solutions require us to have a different idea of the state, a kind of new federalism, which, after the manner of the League of the Iroquois, permits each people in the nation to keep its council fire alight. This requires more than rules; it requires commitment. The Great Law of the Iroquois was remarkable because it was a constitution that had the force of a religion. People were willing, indeed eager, to subscribe to it because they saw it and revered it as the source of peace. Is it too much to hope that in a world riven with ethnic conflict we might search for political solutions more energetically than we have in the past? That we will not continue to expect strong states to iron out ethnicity, even if it means wiping out the "ethnics"? A new federalism is in our own interest, for it offers the hope of peace and the prospect of justice. Nations that trample on the rights of the weak are likely to end up trampling on everybody's rights. As we wring our hands over the fate of tribal peoples in the modern world, we would do well to remember John Donne's words: "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Serious consideration of tribal ways of life should lead us to think carefully and critically about our own. What would it take for us to try to live in harmony with nature or to rehumanize our economic systems? How can we mediate between the

individual and the family, between genders and generations? Should we strive for a less fragmented view of physical reality or of our place in the scheme of things? These questions revolve around wholeness and harmony, around tolerance and pluralism. The answers are still emerging, but they too are variations on a grand theme that can be summed up in E.M. Forster's famous phrase: "Only connect." The project for the new millennium will be to re-energize civil society, the space between the state and the individual where those habits of the heart that socialize the individual and humanize the state flourish.