

Primitive vs. Civilized War

Some contrasts

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This article is excerpted from "The Search for the Primitive," an essay written by Stanley Diamond in 1963 and later revised and expanded for inclusion in his book *In Search of the Primitive* (Transaction Books, 1981). We are reprinting this excerpt because it is relevant to both our ongoing discussions of war and of primitive society, indigenism and modernity.

We are not presenting this material as "paleolithic nostalgia," from which some readers have accused us of suffering. By presenting contrasting modes of dealing with conflict and violence in society, we hope to at a minimum cast doubts on the notion of the "inevitability" of modern civilization and its forms as well as the common argument that modern war is only an expanded version of earlier cultural experiences (and hence the cynical conclusion that nothing has changed). As Diamond writes elsewhere in the same volume, "Our idea of primitive society as existing in a state of dynamic equilibrium and as expressive of human and natural rhythms is a logical projection of civilized societies and is in opposition to civilization's actual state. But it also coincides with the real historical condition of primitive societies. The longing for a primitive mode of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental whim; it is consonant with fundamental human needs, the fulfillment of which (although in different form) is a precondition for our survival."

In primitive society, the ritual drama is a culturally comprehensive vehicle for group and individual expression at critical junctures in the social round or personal life cycle, as these crises are enjoined by the natural environment or defined by culture. In such ceremonies, art, religion and daily life fuse, and cultural meanings are renewed and re-created on a stage as wide as society itself.

In a sequence from archaic to modern civilization, we can trace the process through which religion, drama and daily life split apart. The drama, the primary form of art, retreats to the theater, and religion escapes into the church. The sacraments, those formalized remnants of the primitive crisis rites, and the "theater, the play," develop into carefully cultivated and narrowly bounded conventions. Civilized participation in culture becomes increasingly passive, as culture becomes increasingly secularized.



Hear no evil; see no evil; speak no evil Drawing / Stephen Goodfellow

Among primitives, rituals are cathartic and creative. They are cathartic in that they serve as occasions for open, if culturally molded, expressions of ambivalent feelings about sacred tradition, constituted authority, animal and human nature, and nature at large.

A good example of the cathartic expression of ambivalence toward the sacred occurs in a Wintun's Hesi ceremony which Barret calls "the acme of Wintun ceremonialism." The clown directs his comic assaults at the leader:

"When the captain of the host village was singing as he marched slowly about the inside of the dance house, one of the clowns staged himself before the captain and marched slowly backwards in step with him, while delivering joking remarks concerning the leader's ability to sing and the particular song he was voicing. This did not seem in the least to disconcert the singer, who continued to sing in his gravest manner: but his song was not received with the usual seriousness."

Ritual expression of ambivalence toward constituted authority is illustrated among the Anaguta. Men who are being initiated into the status of elders had the right publicly to challenge elders of long standing, who were still physically vigorous, to a combat with clubs. This took place within a circle of young, newly initiated men dancing slowly to the beat of drums and the sound of horns. No man could be struck above the trunk, and the challenge need not be given or accepted. But for those who desired to do so, this final phase of the men's initiation ceremony afforded the opportunity to work off hostility against particular elders who might have abused their authority. Painful injuries occasionally resulted. Physical cowardice or bluster were exposed, but did not brand a man beyond the situation, and, as noted, there was no obligation to participate, although it was honorable to do so. Nor did the ceremony threaten the general respect in which the elders were held; on the contrary, the institutionalized expression of ambivalence helped buttress the social structure generally.

These rituals are also creative in the dramatic revelation of symbols and the anticipation and elaboration of new roles for individuals; they make meanings explicit and renew the vitality of the group.

Primitive and Modern Ritual

The Nama role-transition rites are indicative. At puberty, childbirth, the death of a spouse, the contraction of certain diseases, the slaying of an enemy in war, the killing of a large game animal and similar occasions, the individual is said to be in a condition called *!nau* (in an unclean, labile or dangerous state). During these periods, he is suspended between two statuses and is considered to be dangerous to himself and to others; he is in the tribe but not of it. Therefore, he is isolated, and placed in the care of an immune guardian, who has passed through the *!nau* period for the identical event. In order to be restored to normality, a person must undergo a ritual cleansing, participate in a common meal with people who have emerged from the same situation and then be re-introduced into the life of the tribe by his guardian, at a ceremonial dance. The person is, in short, reborn.

These experiences lead to a hierarchical development of the social self, which, in turn, assimilates contradictory forms of behavior without traumatic consequences. Among the Indians of the American plains, for example, the status of warrior could be succeeded by a status of higher order—that of "Peace Chief," honored for his wisdom and experience. He was the guardian of the well-being of the people; his balanced judgment prevailed over the special interests of the warriors.

Put another way, the primitive rituals are creative in the reduction and cultural use of anxiety arising out of a variety of existential situations. Birth, death, puberty, marriage, divorce, illness—generally speaking, the assumption of new roles, responsibilities, and psychological states, as these are socially defined and naturally induced—serve as the occasions for the ritual drama.

These experiences can be perceived as a progressive spiritualization of the person throughout the life cycle; among certain peoples a woman is said to become pregnant through the incorporation of a grand parental spirit who is then reborn, but not precisely duplicated, at the actual birth of the infant. This is not to say that primitive peoples are unaware of the connection between intercourse and conception, but rather that they are capable of sustaining both realities, the metaphorical on the one hand and the reductively biological on the other, without

contradiction. Analogously, when Australian aboriginal elders whirl their bull-roarers or churingas, said to represent the voices of the ancestors until the moment when the "truth" is exposed to the young men at initiation, the duality of this truth can be transcended. For it is understood that the elders have the power of summoning, of creating the voices of the ancestors. Unfortunately, the positivism of Western trained anthropologists has time and again led them to make irrelevant distinctions between the two aspects of reality represented in these instances. In any event, the life cycles of primitive peoples are not merely a series of moments bounded by discrete ritual structures; rather, the ritual structures symbolize the continuous, dynamic process of social maturation. Naturally, the formal ritual structure varies from culture to culture, but the functions are mutually assimilable.

Such rituals are, I believe, primarily expressive, as opposed to the predominantly binding, compulsive, "ritualistic" behavior encountered as neurotic phenomena among civilized individuals. [1]

The primitive ritual also differs from ritualized group occasions in civilized society; the latter strive toward repression of ambivalence rather than recognition and cultural use. One can hardly imagine a "burlesque of the sacred" taking place at, let us say, a patriotic ceremony; in this sense all state structures tend toward the totalitarian. But, among primitives, sacred events are frequently and publicly caricatured, even as they occur. In primitive rituals, what we would call the fundamental paradoxes of human life—love and hate, the comic and the tragic, dedication and denial and their derivatives—are specified, given free, sometimes uninhibited, even murderous "play" in quite the sense that Huizinga uses that word. [2]

But let us remember, to adopt an extreme example, that even ritualized cannibalism or the torture of the self or others, recognize and directly confront the concrete humanity of the subject. The purpose of ritual cannibalism is not only the humiliation of the enemy, but also the absorption of his heroic human qualities. In a way that is repugnant to civilized sensibilities, cannibalism was a bloody sacrament, perhaps the first sacrament. Torture, whether inflicted on the self or others, is, of course, sadistic and masochistic, but it was frequently a test of endurance, of manhood and the capacity for spirituality. Here, for example, is what the Eskimos say, "Let the person who wants a vision hang himself by his neck. When his face turns purple, take it down and have him describe what he's seen." But it should be noted that in no instance is the purpose of primitive torture the conversion of the victim to the torturer's point of view; ideological imperatives are not the issue.

Yet the sanguine and terrifying aspects of primitive life, which the civilized individuals could hardly sustain, precisely because of the immediate personal contexts in which they occur, do not begin to compete with the mass, impersonal, rationalized slaughter that increases in scope as civilization spreads and deepens.

The impersonal process should not be confused with the primitive attitude towards strangers. It has been frequently assumed that the stranger is not perceived as a human being by the members of any given primitive society and, consequently, can be treated in a subhuman way. But this notion, in any event not to be confused with civilized estrangement, is contradicted by both psychological deduction and ethnological evidence. Psychologically, the intensely personal, including totemic, associations which link man to society and society to nature, argue against the validity of assuming that the stranger is an exclusive exception. As Marshall Sahlins put it: "Ordinarily, savages pride themselves on being hospitable to strangers." Nor does the fact that many primitive peoples call themselves by the name which represents "human being" imply anything more than recognition of their uniqueness in a state of nature. Indeed, the dialectic between the uniqueness of the human being and the understanding of his commonality in nature, defines a dynamic perception in primitive culture. The primitive attitude towards the stranger, then, is not a reflection of the latter's nonexistence as a human being, but of his lack of status as a social person. It follows that some way must be found to incorporate the stranger into a recognized system of statuses before one is able to relate to him specifically.

Among the Australian aborigines, the complex system of marriage classes and descent groups permits an individual to orient himself almost immediately on the territory of a strange band hundreds of miles from his native area. Adoption of prisoners of war, or the incorporation of a white man into an aboriginal galaxy of living spirits serve an analogous purpose. The point is that in primitive society a person must be socially located and named before his human potential is converted into a cultural identity. Among the Igbo-speaking peoples of south-eastern Nigeria, and this is typical, an infant is a human but not a social being until he is given a name at an elaborate ceremony some months after his birth.

In fact, throughout the life cycle among many primitive peoples, naming expresses the need to reintegrate all aspects of the developing personality into the social group. Persons may have multiple names at any given time in their lives, and names may also be given when they assume new roles and statuses. Tylor understood this ethnology of naming very well although his progressivistic perspective is, of course, unjustified: "Lower down in the history of culture, the word and the idea are found sticking together with a tenacity very different from their weak adhesion in our minds, and there is to be seen a tendency to grasp at the word as though it were the object it stands for, and to hold that to be able to speak of a thing gives a sort of possession of it, in a way that we can scarcely realize."

Perhaps this state of mind was hardly ever so clearly brought into view as in a story told by Dr. Lieber. "I was looking lately at a negro who was occupied in feeding young mockingbirds by the hand. 'Would they eat worms?' I asked. The negro replied, 'Surely not, they are too young, they would not know what to call them.'"

To the degree that the person, or aspects of the person, are not named, to that degree the person remains a "stranger," even within the group. Thus we can distinguish between internal and external social strangers among primitives, and the structure of estrangement in civilization.

War in Primitive Society

In this connection, how can I ever forget the shock and horror expressed by an Anaguta' informant of mine, whom I had persuaded to attend an American (war) movie in a nearby town. This man spent several hours acting out, in my presence, the indiscriminate, casual, unceremonious killing which he had witnessed on the screen. It was almost impossible for him to believe that human beings could behave in this way toward each other, and he decided that it must be a special attribute of white men—superhuman, and at the same time, subhuman. He finally sublimated the experience to the character of a legend. It was his first movie.

The point is that the wars and rituals of primitive society (and the former usually had the style of the latter), are quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from the mechanized wars of civilization. The contrast is not merely in the exponential factor of technology multiplying a constant, homicidal human impulse; in primitive society, taking a life was an occasion; in our phase of civilization it has become an abstract, ideological compulsion. The character of this contrast is implicit in the words of George Bird Grinnell:

"Among the plains tribes with which I am well-acquainted—and the same is true of all the others of which I know anything at all—coming in actual personal contact with the enemy by touching him with something held in the hand or with a part of the person was the bravest act that could be performed...the bravest act that could be performed was to count coup on—to touch or strike—a living unhurt man and to leave him alive, and this was frequently done... It was regarded as an evidence of bravery for a man to go into battle—carrying no weapon that would do any harm at a distance. It was more creditable to carry a lance than a bow and arrows; more creditable to carry a hatchet or war club than a lance; and the bravest thing of all was to go into a fight with nothing more than a whip, or a long twig—sometimes called a coup stick. I have never heard a stone-headed war club called coup stick [*italics added*]."

Such a war is a kind of play. No matter what the occasion for hostility, it is particularized, personalized, ritualized. Conversely, civilization represses hostility in the particular, fails to use or structure it, even denies it.

In that uncanny movie Dr. Strangelove, for example, the commanding general of the Air Force and the Soviet Ambassador, who have clumsily managed to attack each other, are admonished by the President: "Gentlemen, no fighting in the (computerized) war-room." The point is that in civilization "hostility" explodes with a redoubled, formless bestiality, while we, so to speak, look the other way, refined and not responsible. One is reminded of the character of Dr. Strangelove, whose repressed, crippled, gloved hand, struggled constantly to choke him to death; this schizoid tension is not exorcised until the bombs fall, until the indescribable energies are released, and the paralyzed professor rises with joy from his wheelchair, finding his personal apotheosis at the moment of the extinction of the species.

Increasingly Impersonal Wars

We wage increasingly impersonal wars, and unlike the Crow, kill at increasing psychic distance from our victims. Or note the contrast with the notorious Jivaro, whose women, fearing his spirit, sing to the shrunken head of an enemy during the series of head hunting rituals:

“Now, now, go back to your house where you lived

“Your wife is there calling you from your house.

“You have come here to make us happy

“Finally we have finished

“So return.”

Civilization blames its crimes on its leaders, more sophisticatedly on abstract, historical forces and finally, abandoning these culprits, despairs utterly of man. Dissociation culminates in depression.

But such unbalanced despair is not reflected, so far as I am aware, in the oral traditions of primitive peoples.

That dissociation and depression were evident in our response to the episode at My Lai, which further reveals the nature of modern civilized war generally, and, hence the nature of our society. That is to say, it is part of the culturally and psychically dissociative process which threatens the existence of all of us. By dissociation, I mean, elaborating on my previous reference, the process through which we lose touch with the meaning, the predicate of our own behavior—with our own humanity, and the humanity of the other. That militaristic conception of the person, acted out at My Lai, is generic to state organizations. The first political societies, as Tylor tells us, were patterned after armies—and the conception is alienated, irresponsible, ultimately absurd in the political sense. Political absurdity is the converse of what can be termed existential absurdity; existential absurdity is confronted in primitive society and typically celebrated, not only as an aspect of ritual, but in the omnipresent, ambivalent, tragicomic, mythological figure of the trickster.

Modern mass society creates the modern mass soldier, as a reflection of itself. The effort is made to train him as a deadly bureaucratic machine; in fact he may even shortly become obsolete to be replaced by machines, as the General of the American Army anticipates. And this would certainly follow the history and logic of automation. On the other hand, this reduced person, this bureaucratic soldier, has a repressed affect which can explode, given the weapons at his disposal, into the most obliterating behavior. He kills, whether by bombing at a distance or face to face—but he kills, it should be re-emphasized, at great psychic distance. “We might as well be bombing New York,” said an Air Force Officer in Vietnam. This distance is compounded, of course, by the ethnocentrism which the United States as an imperial power instills into its citizens. But the modern mass soldier does not hate the specific enemy, which is an inverted way of saying that he does not necessarily recognize the humanity of the specific enemy. When the massacre at My Lai is compared to the routine bombing from the air of similar villages in the so-called “free fire zone,” populated by other “Pinksvilles” (how more dissociated can a reference to a human habitation be), the comparison is, it seems to me, psychodynamically valid; the distinction is real but insignificant. For example, in the face to face encounter at My Lai, the American soldier typically dehumanized the South Vietnamese civilians as “gooks.”

But this was a false concretization, expressing in a stereotype the needs of the soldiers involved, and irrelevant to the actual existence of the object. Killing a “gook,” or a Jew, remains killing at a distance, although physical proximity demands more of the psyche than bombing from the air; the total dissociation of the former is converted into the direct subjective distortion of the latter. The point remains that the people killed were insufficiently alive in the consciousness of the killers—and this mirrors the actors’ inadequate sense of their own humanity. What we were facing at My Lai, then, is not an incident, not even a policy, but the tragic course of a civilization.

Certain ritual dramas or aspects of them acknowledge, express and symbolize the most destructive, ambivalent and demoniacal aspects of human nature. In so doing, they are left limited and finite, that is, they become self-limiting. For this, as yet, we have no civilized parallel, no functional equivalent [3]

NOTES

1. An Eskimo game bordering on ritual, reported by Peter Freuchen, is illustrative: "There was also the rather popular game of 'doused lights.' The rules were simple. Many people gathered in a house, all of them completely nude. Then the lights were extinguished, and darkness reigned, Nobody was allowed to say anything, and all changed places continually. At a certain signal each man grabbed the nearest woman. After a while, the lights were put on again, and now innumerable jokes could be made over the theme: 'I knew all the time who you were because-'; several old stories deal with this popular amusement. It should be said that—crude as it may seem to use—it often served a very practical purpose. Let us, for instance, say that bad weather conditions are keeping a flock of Eskimos confined to a house or an igloo. The bleakness and utter loneliness of the Arctic when it shows its bad side can get on the nerves of even those people who know it and love it the most. Eskimos could go out of their minds, because bad weather always means uncertain fates. Then suddenly someone douses the light, and everybody runs around in the dark and ends up with a partner. Later the lamp is lit again, the whole party is joking and in high spirits. *A psychological explosion—with possible bloodshed—has been averted*" (italics added).
2. "The concept of play," writes Huizinga, "merges quite naturally with that of holiness...any line of tragedy proves it. By considering the whole sphere of so-called primitive culture as a play-sphere we pave the way to a more direct and more general understanding...than any meticulous psychological or sociological analysis would allow... Primitive...ritual is thus sacred play, indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development..."
3. Meyer Fortes expresses a parallel idea: "I do not mean to imply that everybody is always happy, contented and free of care in primitive society. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence that among them, as with us, affability may conceal hatred and jealousy, friendliness and devotion enjoined by law and morals may mask enmity, exemplary citizenship may be a way of compensating for frustration and fears. The important thing is that in primitive societies there are customary methods of dealing with these common human problems of emotional adjustment by which they are externalized, publicly accepted, and given treatment in terms of ritual beliefs; society takes over the burden which, with us, falls entirely on; the individual...This is easy in primitive societies where the boundary between the inner world of the self and the outer world of the community marks their line of fusion rather than of separation."

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