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978-1-108-06849-9 - The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man:

Mental and Social Condition of Savages

John Lubbock

Excerpt

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THE ORIGIN OF CIVILISATION.

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

THE study of the lower races of men, apart from the direct importance which it possesses in an empire like ours, is of great interest from three points of view. In the first place, the condition and habits of existing savages resemble in many ways, though not in all, those of our own ancestors in a period now long gone by; in the second, they illustrate much of what is passing among ourselves, many customs which have evidently no relation to present circumstances, and even some ideas which are rooted in our minds, as fossils are imbedded in the soil; and thirdly, we can even, by means of them, penetrate some of that mist which separates the present from the future.

Well, therefore, has it been observed by Maine, in his excellent work on 'Ancient Law,' that, 'even if they gave more trouble than they do, no pains would be wasted in ascertaining the germs out of which has assuredly been unfolded every form of moral restraint which controls our actions and shapes our conduct at the present

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moment. The rudiments of the social state, so far as they are known to us at all, are known through testimony of three sorts—accounts by contemporary observers of civilisations less advanced than their own, the records which particular races have preserved concerning their primitive history, and ancient law. The first kind of evidence is the best we could have expected. As societies do not advance concurrently, but at different rates of progress, there have been epochs at which men trained to habits of methodical observation have really been in a position to watch and describe the infancy of mankind.¹ He refers particularly to Tacitus, whom he praises for having ‘made the most of such an opportunity;’ adding, however, ‘but the “Germany,” unlike most celebrated classical books, has not induced others to follow the excellent example set by its author, and the amount of this sort of testimony which we possess is exceedingly small.’

This is very far, however, from being the case; at all epochs some ‘men trained to habits of methodical observation have really been in a position to watch and describe the infancy of mankind,’ and the testimony of our modern travellers is of the same sort as that for which we are indebted to Tacitus. It is, indeed, much to be regretted that Mr. Maine, in his admirable work, did not more extensively avail himself of this source of information, for an acquaintance with the laws and customs of modern savages would have enabled him greatly to strengthen his arguments on some points, while it would certainly have modified his views on others. Thus he lays it down as an obvious proposition that ‘the organisation of primitive societies would have been confounded, if men had called themselves relatives of their mother’s relatives,’ while I shall pre-

¹ Maine’s Ancient Law, p. 120.

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sently show that, as indeed Mr. McLennan has already pointed out, relationship through females is a common custom of savage communities all over the world.

But though our information with reference to the social and moral condition of the lower races of man is much more considerable than Mr. Maine supposed, it is certainly very far from being satisfactory either in extent or in accuracy. Travellers naturally find it far easier to describe the houses, boats, food, dress, weapons, and implements of savages, than to understand their thoughts and feelings. The whole mental condition of a savage is so different from ours, that it is often very difficult to follow what is passing in his mind, or to understand the motives by which he is influenced. Many things appear natural and almost self-evident to him, which produce a very different impression on us. 'What!' said a negro to Burton, 'am I to starve, while my sister has children whom she can sell?'

Though savages always have a reason, such as it is, for what they do and what they believe, their reasons often are very absurd. Moreover, the difficulty of ascertaining what is passing in their minds is of course much enhanced by the difficulty of communicating with them. This has produced many laughable mistakes. Thus, when Labilardiè re enquired of the Friendly Islanders the word for 1,000,000, they seem to have thought the question absurd, and gave him one which apparently has no meaning; when he asked for 10,000,000, they said 'looole,' which I will leave unexplained; for 100,000,000 'laounoua,' that is to say, 'nonsense;' while for the higher numbers they gave him certain coarse expressions, which he has gravely published in his table of numerals.

A mistake made by Dampier led to more serious results. He had met some Australians, and apprehending an attack, he says:—'I discharged my gun to scare them, but

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avoided shooting any of them ; till finding the young man in great danger from them, and myself in some, and that though the gun had a little frightened them at first, yet *they had soon learnt to despise it*, tossing up their hands, and crying, “pooh, pooh, pooh ;” and coming on afresh with a great noise, I thought it high time to charge again, and shoot one of them, which I did. The rest, seeing him fall, made a stand again, and my young man took the opportunity to disengage himself, and come off to me ; my other man also was with me, who had done nothing all this while, having come out unarmed ; and I returned back with my men, designing to attempt the natives no farther, being very sorry for what had happened already. ¹ Pooh, pooh, however, or puff, puff, is the name which savages, like children, naturally apply to guns.

Another source of error is that savages are often reluctant to contradict what is said to them. Thus Mr. Oldfield,² speaking of the Australians, tells us :— ‘ I have found this habit of non-contradiction to stand very much in my way when making enquiries of them ; for, as my knowledge of their language was only sufficient to enable me to seek information on some points by putting suggestive questions, in which they immediately concurred, I was frequently driven nearly to my wits’ end to arrive at the truth. A native once brought me in some specimens of a species of eucalyptus, and being desirous of ascertaining the habit of the plant, I asked, “ A tall tree ? ” to which his ready answer was in the affirmative. Not feeling quite satisfied, I again demanded, “ A low bush ? ” to which “ yes ” was also the response.’

Again, the mind of the savage, like that of the child, is easily fatigued, and he will then give random answers to

¹ Pinkerton’s Voyages, vol. xi. p. 473. ² Trans. Ethn. Soc. N.S. vol. iii. p. 255.

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spare himself the trouble of thought. Speaking of the Ahts (N.W. America), Mr. Sproat¹ says:—‘The native mind, to an educated man, seems generally to be asleep; and, if you suddenly ask a novel question, you have to repeat it while the mind of the savage is awaking, and to speak with emphasis until he has quite got your meaning. This may partly arise from the questioner’s imperfect knowledge of the language; still, I think, not entirely, as the savage may be observed occasionally to become forgetful, when voluntarily communicating information. On his attention being fully aroused, he often shows much quickness in reply and ingenuity in argument. But a short conversation wearies him, particularly if questions are asked that require efforts of thought or memory on his part. The mind of the savage then appears to rock to and fro out of mere weakness, and he tells lies and talks nonsense.’

‘I frequently enquired of the negroes,’ says Park, ‘what became of the sun during the night, and whether we should see the same sun, or a different one, in the morning; but I found that they considered the question as very childish. The subject appeared to them as placed beyond the reach of human investigation; they had never indulged a conjecture, nor formed any hypothesis, about the matter.’²

Such ideas are, in fact, entirely beyond the mental range of the lower savages, whose extreme mental inferiority we have much difficulty in realising.

Speaking of the wild men in the interior of Borneo, Mr. Dalton says that³ they are found living ‘absolutely in a state of nature, who neither cultivate the ground, nor live

¹ *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life*, p. 120.

² *Park’s Travels*, vol. i. p. 265.

³ *Moor’s Notices of the Indian Army*, p. 49. See also *Keppel’s Expedition to Borneo*, vol. ii. p. x.

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in huts; who neither eat rice nor salt, and who do not associate with each other, but rove about some woods, like wild beasts; the sexes meet in the jungle, or the man carries away a woman from some campong. When the children are old enough to shift for themselves, they usually separate, neither one afterwards thinking of the other: at night they sleep under some large tree, the branches of which hang low. On these they fasten the children in a kind of swing; around the tree they make a fire to keep off the wild beasts and snakes,—they cover themselves with a piece of bark, and in this also they wrap their children; it is soft and warm, but will not keep out the rain. The poor creatures are looked on and treated by the other Dyaks as wild beasts.’

Lichtenstein thus describes a Bushman:—‘One of our present guests, who appeared about fifty years of age, who had grey hair and a bristly beard, whose forehead, nose, cheeks, and chin were all smeared over with black grease, having only a white circle round the eye washed clean with the tears occasioned by smoking—this man had the true physiognomy of the small blue ape of Caffraria. What gives the more verity to such a comparison was the vivacity of his eyes, and the flexibility of his eyebrows, which he worked up and down with every change of countenance. Even his nostrils and the corners of his mouth, nay his very ears, moved involuntarily, expressing his hasty transitions from eager desire to watchful distrust. There was not, on the contrary, a single feature in his countenance that evinced a consciousness of mental powers, or anything that denoted emotions of the mind of a milder species than what belong to man in his mere animal nature. When a piece of meat was given him, and half rising he stretched out a distrustful arm to take it, he snatched it hastily, and stuck it immediately into

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the fire, peering around with his little keen eyes, as if fearing lest some one should take it away again :—all this was done with such looks and gestures, that anyone must have been ready to swear he had taken the example of them entirely from an ape. He soon took the meat from the embers, wiped it hastily with his right hand upon his left arm, and tore out large half-raw bits with his teeth, which I could see going entire down his meagre throat.¹

Under these circumstances it cannot be wondered that we have most contradictory accounts as to the character and mental condition of savages. Nevertheless, by comparing together the accounts of different travellers, we can to a great extent avoid these sources of error; and we are very much aided in this by the remarkable similarity between different races. So striking indeed is this, that different races in similar stages of development often present more features of resemblance to one another than the same race does to itself, in different stages of its history.

Some ideas, indeed, which seem to us at first inexplicable and fantastic are yet very widely distributed. Thus among many races a woman is absolutely forbidden to speak to her son-in-law. Franklin² tells us that among the American Indians of the far North, ‘it is considered extremely improper for a mother-in-law to speak or even look at him; and when she has a communication to make to him, it is the etiquette that she should turn her back upon him, and address him only through the medium of a third person.’

Further south among the Omahaws, ‘neither the father-in-law nor mother-in-law will hold any direct communica-

¹ Lichtenstein, vol. ii. p. 224.

² Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, vol. i. p. 137.

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tion with their son-in-law ; nor will he, on any occasion, or under any consideration, converse immediately with them, although no ill will exists between them ; they will not, on any account, mention each other's name in company, nor look in each other's faces ; any conversation that passes between them is conducted through the medium of some other person.¹

Harmon says that among the Indians east of the Rocky Mountains the same rule prevails. Lafitau,² indeed, makes the same statements as regards the North American Indians generally. We find it among the Crees and Dacotahs and again in Florida. Rochefort mentions it among the Caribs, and in South America it recurs among the Arawaks.

In Asia among the Mongols and Calmucks a woman must not speak to her father-in-law nor sit down in his presence. Among the Ostiaks³ of Siberia, 'une fille mariée évite autant qu'il lui est possible la présence du père de son mari, tant qu'elle n'a pas d'enfant ; et le mari, pendant ce tems, n'ose pas paroître devant la mère de sa femme. S'ils se rencontrent par hasard, le mari lui tourne le dos, et la femme se couvre le visage. On ne donne point de nom aux filles Ostiakes ; lorsqu'elles sont mariées, les hommes les nomment Imi, femmes. Les femmes, par respect pour leurs maris, ne les appellent pas par leur nom ; elles se servent du mot de Tahé, hommes.'

In China, according to Duhalde, the father-in-law, after the wedding day, 'never sees the face of his daughter-in-law again, he never visits her,' and if they chance to meet

¹ James's Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, vol. i. p. 232.

² Mœurs des Sauvages Américains, vol. i. p. 576.

³ Pallas, vol. iv. pp. 71, 577. He makes the same statement with reference to the Samoyedes. *loc. cit.* p. 99.

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he hides himself.¹ A similar custom prevails in Borneo and in the Fiji Islands. In Australia Eyre states that a man must not pronounce the name of his father-in-law, his mother-in-law, or his son-in-law.

In Central Africa Caillié¹ observes that, 'From this moment the lover is not to see the father and mother of his future bride: he takes the greatest care to avoid them, and if by chance they perceive him they cover their faces, as if all ties of friendship were broken. I tried in vain to discover the origin of this whimsical custom; the only answer I could obtain was, "It is our way." The custom extends beyond the relations; if the lover is of a different camp, he avoids all the inhabitants of the lady's camp, except a few intimate friends whom he is permitted to visit. A little tent is generally set up for him, under which he remains all day, and if he is obliged to come out, or to cross the camp, he covers his face. He is not allowed to see his intended during the day, but, when everybody is at rest, he creeps into her tent and remains with her till daybreak.' While among the Bushmen in the far South, Chapman recounts exactly the same thing, yet none of these observers had any idea how general the custom is.

Mr. Tyler, who has some very interesting remarks on these customs in his 'Early History of Man,' observes that 'it is hard even to guess what state of things can have brought them into existence,' nor, so far as I am aware, has anyone else attempted to explain them. In the Chapter on Marriage I shall, however, point out the manner in which I conceive that they have arisen.

Another curious custom is that known in Bearn under

¹ Astley's Collection of Voyages, vol. iv. p. 91.

² Caillié's Travels to Timbuctoo, vol. i. p. 94.

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the name of *La Couvade*. Probably every Englishman who had not studied other races would assume, as a matter of course, that on the birth of a child the mother would everywhere be put to bed and nursed. But this is not the case. In many races the father, and not the mother, is doctored when a baby is born.

Yet though this custom seems so ludicrous to us, it is very widely distributed. Commencing with South America, Dobritzhoffer tells us that 'No sooner do you hear that a woman has borne a child, than you see the husband lying in bed, huddled up with mats and skins, lest some ruder breath of air should touch him, fasting, kept in private, and for a number of days abstaining religiously from certain viands; you would swear it was he who had had the child. . . . I had read about this in old times, and laughed at it, never thinking I could believe such madness, and I used to suspect that this barbarian custom was related more in jest than in earnest; but at last I saw it with my own eyes among the Abipones.'

In Brazil among the Coroados, Martius tells us that 'As soon as the woman is evidently pregnant, or has been delivered, the man withdraws. A strict regimen is observed before the birth; the man and the woman refrain for a time from the flesh of certain animals and live chiefly on fish and fruits.'

Further north, in Guiana, Mr. Brett² observes that some of the men of the *Acawoio* and *Caribi* nations, when they have reason to expect an increase of their families, consider themselves bound to abstain from certain kinds of meat, lest the expected child should, in some very mysterious way, be injured by their partaking of it. The *Acouri* (or *Agouti*) is thus tabooed, lest, like that little

¹ Spix and Martius's *Travels in Brazil*, vol. ii. p. 247.

² Brett's *Indian Tribes of Guiana*, p. 355.