

# Through the looking glass

*All the years of calling the Indian a 'savage' has never made him one.*

Luther Standing Bear, Oglala Lakota, USA

Attempts to exonerate the illegal occupation of tribal lands are similar to how slavery was justified in the early nineteenth century, or how apartheid was defended a generation ago. People can get away with this largely because tribal voices speaking in their own defence carry relatively little force: tribal peoples are both numerically small and politically weak. But public reactions play a vital role as well. If the treatment of indigenous peoples is going to be acknowledged as a crime rather than an historical inevitability, it is important to understand how these attitudes arise.

## **Cannibal? Noble savage?**

With the exceptions of the devastation wreaked by disease, and difficulties emerging from an unpredictable climate, all other problems faced by indigenous peoples are underpinned by racist prejudice. This dangerous cocktail of beliefs has three main ingredients: indigenous people are supposed to be savage, even subhuman, as well as unintelligent and childlike. Racists believe more or less the

same about all who are different. These presumed qualities make tribal peoples inferior to others, which is thought to legitimize the violation of their rights, particularly if it is for the benefit of supposedly more civilized, intelligent and grown-up beings. The latter may take indigenous lands because tribes are thought not to have the capacity to use it properly; they do not exploit it in the way that intelligent adults would.

The first view – that they are savages – encompasses their supposedly being violent, unpredictable, and uncontrollable, as well as dirty and lazy. One of the most extreme accusations of violence can be seen in the charge of cannibalism.

Cartoon cannibalism shows ‘primitives’ around a pot, boiling up a hapless captive prior to eating him. The image largely originates with a sixteenth century German, Hans Staden, who said he had been captured by Tupinambá Indians in Brazil and claimed he saw them cooking and eating their Indian enemies. It is impossible to tell to what degree his account is true. Many inventive stories emerged from the same era, men with faces in their chests, a single eye in their forehead, and so on. Indeed, a similar, if not as extreme, trait is not confined to past history: modern accounts of travel in ‘distant’ lands frequently use dramatic embellishment, often largely invented to enhance prestige, book sales and television viewing figures. Staden also had an interest in ensuring his tale would sell. Not surprisingly, it did. His dramatic title ladled it on thick: he called it, *The True History... of Grim, Wild, Naked Man-eating People*. Staden’s pictures of huge pots and outdoor barbecues look unconvincing to many, and it would be astonishing if he did not at least over-embellish what he actually saw, but there is no way of being certain. Nor do we know what the

Tupinambá thought of the Europeans, though other South American Indians certainly thought it was the invaders who were the cannibals.

Cannibalism has been reported from elsewhere as well, particularly from the Pacific. Some Papuans claim to eat their enemies, or to have done so in the past, though some think this is largely boasting! In fact, on close examination, there is not one verifiable account from anywhere; in other words, no one who seems credible, without an axe to grind, book to sell, or mission to fund, has ever seen a tribal person kill and eat someone out of custom. Some social scientists think that all accounts are a myth; others believe denying cannibalism is mere wishful thinking, an attempt to turn a blind eye to an uncomfortable reality.

What is certainly true is that some tribal peoples do have a custom of ingesting portions of the ashes, or flesh, of the already dead. These are usually their kin, but some also do this with their enemies. Some Brazilian tribes, for example, say they sometimes used to eat their liver. It is also true that many – non-tribal – people resort to consuming human flesh in times of extreme hunger. There are dozens of eyewitness accounts of this, from times of war, shipwreck, and so forth. The much more extreme step, in similar extraordinary predicaments, of first killing in order to eat is also well known. In addition, there are many verifiable accounts of cannibalism resulting from extreme deviancy. This has happened in industrialized countries recently, and there is little reason to think that similar odd behaviour does not crop up amongst indigenous peoples as well.

Paradoxically, as well as tragically, some tribal peoples who may be the victims, rather than perpetrators, of cannibalism are Pygmies in the Democratic Republic of Congo: as I mentioned before, some have reportedly been

killed in order to be eaten in special war rituals by the violence-crazed militias which have fought over the region for decades.

As well as cannibalism, indigenous peoples were also routinely accused of practising human sacrifice. This was used as an important justification for Europeans to invade and conquer them, and was given wide publicity in the colonial era: it was commonly reported from British India, for example, where it did seem to have taken place, though very rarely. There is no doubt, however, that it was formerly practised by some peoples in a ritual context. This is widely known, and perhaps the most famous example concerns the Aztecs. (Those familiar with the Bible will also know that Abraham, ancestor of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, was going to sacrifice his own son ritually.) The other really savage accusation levelled at some tribal peoples is that of child- or baby-killing, called infanticide, which I have already touched on.

It is – rightly – difficult to look at cruel behaviour with any degree of objectivity. However, even a cursory study will show that tribal peoples have no savage practices which cannot also be found amongst the so-called ‘civilized’, as I have shown when describing both infanticide and genital mutilation. Indigenous peoples *can* sometimes behave like savages, just like everyone else.

The second plank in the racist view about tribal peoples is that they lack intelligence. This notion can be reinforced because quite a lot of indigenous communities are now home to the decaying remains of aid projects which have fallen apart as soon as the Western agency which instigated them left. New-style housing, water pipes, latrines, and agricultural projects have all been apparently welcomed by communities curious to see what was in it for them only to be

subsequently discarded at the earliest opportunity. Although such a scenario is not confined to indigenous peoples, it gives ammunition to the belief that they lack the ability to see the advantages such schemes confer. The reality is that this has nothing to do with any inability to grasp new benefits: usually, the abandoned projects were simply felt to be disadvantageous in the long run, though the reasons are often social rather than economic, and may remain obscure to outsiders.

A very good example concerns Western-style concrete or plank houses which have been built all over the world to 'modernize' tribespeople's 'primitive' dwellings, and which usually stand empty. They are simply not as practical as the houses they are supposed to replace. In Papua, they are often kept for pigs, whilst the people carry on in their former dwellings. Other than in the minds of some development agencies and governments, these houses are not always better than what was there already. For example, an earth floor is easier to keep clean than one made of concrete, dirt is quickly absorbed, or can easily be swept out or dug up, and it never needs washing. Many Amazon Indians are meticulous about cleanliness and the floors of their communal houses are swept several times daily. Similarly, a new tin roof can be much less comfortable than one made of thatch. In the tropics, metal roofs are hotter in the sun, noisier in the rain, decay quicker, and are harder to repair.

Cheapness, the ready availability of local materials, and ease of repair, are only some of the reasons why long-established house design can be difficult to improve on. For example, Maasai houses made of branches, mud and dried animal dung, are very dark inside. This can seem inconvenient to visitors (especially when many Maasai do not bother with electric flashlights), but it keeps away the

plagues of flies which swarm perpetually around the nearby cow and goat herds, and which invade any well-lit, 'modern' houses in the vicinity.

In 2011, the Rwandan government tried to destroy all 'primitive' thatched roofs in the country, forcing people to buy metal sheeting. Hundreds of Batwa 'Pygmy' people were made homeless, as the free roofing the 'most destitute' were supposed to be given rarely materialized. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that this and similar 'development' schemes are more about securing profits for manufacturers than merely misguided attempts to 'modernize'. Where indigenous people abandon recently-adopted Western ways, there is usually a perfectly intelligent reason – they are not being stupid (though of course no one would claim that tribal societies are freer of foolishness than others).

The third main accusation – that indigenous peoples are childlike – derives partly from the noticeable spontaneity of hunting societies, where people seem to plan little for the future. They eat when food is available, often gorging, and then go without for days. Of course, a 'civilized' way of life requires more forethought. A hunter-gathering society has, on its doorstep, the equivalent of its supermarket, hospital, place of worship, and entertainment centre, and none are shut at weekends. There are no admission fees, no bills, no tax, no mortgage, and no pensions. A house and food cost nothing, so there is little need to plan far in advance. These are also, of course, the keys to why their land is so much more important for tribal peoples than it is for almost anyone else. It means literally everything to them, including life itself.

It is arguable that such spontaneity, their 'living in the moment', is a key factor behind what might be described as the 'goal' of many tribal societies (if any society can be described as having goals). In their case, it is to maintain a

healthy life – in a physical and spiritual sense – rather than share the ambition of the industrialized nations to seek perpetual ‘progress’ or ‘growth’, revolving around wealth. Although the benefits of such growth go largely unquestioned by many Westerners, particularly those in positions of power, it is worth remembering that these ideas really only took off when industrialization began seeing individuals primarily as workers, people who earned money in order to buy things produced by other workers. However widely accepted the notion has become – that buying and selling are the keys to a good life – it has far from convinced everyone: there are plenty of people, including many in the industrialized world, who ‘opt out’, and choose to live rather separately, in communes, religious groups, as Travellers, or just in small rural communities. Unlike tribes, they are not generally held to be less intelligent or childlike as a result.

It is also worth recalling that *most* of the world’s societies, as opposed to individuals, do not promote the same obsession with the pursuit of wealth and power as does the industrialized West, and others who now want to copy the model.

Perhaps curiously, those (like me) who assert the realities about tribal ways of life, and refute the racist view that they are savage, stupid and childish, are often accused of romantically portraying the ‘noble savage’. This is an old concept that is worth exploring. Although ancient European and Arabic philosophers expressed a similar idea, it first took serious root with the glowing accounts written by the early explorers about Central American Indians and Pacific Islanders. The Swiss philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, touched on the idea in several works, especially in his famous 1762 book, *The Social Contract*. It is Rousseau who is usually, though inaccurately, credited with inventing the concept of

the 'noble savage', and so the view is often named 'Rousseauesque'.

Proponents of the 'noble savage' assert that peoples are corrupted by 'civilization', and live better without it. Some social scientists have gone out of their way to demonstrate that this is wrong, claiming the idea is itself patronizing and even racist. One way of doing this has been to document the incidence of conflict in certain tribal societies, to emphasize their violent, as opposed to any 'noble', side. The best-known example is Napoleon Chagnon's description of Yanomami Indians in Venezuela in the 1960s. This American anthropologist called the Indians, and titled his best-selling book, *The Fierce People*, and produced data and films showing them exercising brutal levels of violence against each other with little apparent provocation. Sir Edmund Leach, the doyen of British anthropology in the 1970s, went further when he wrote that if Yanomami 'traditional culture' was 'protected', the Indians 'would then exterminate one another'! However, researchers working subsequently with the same people found the Yanomami generally peaceable, and certainly not the violence-obsessed creatures they had read about as undergraduates. Some feel this raises serious ethical, as well as scientific, questions over the degree to which anthropological data can be selected, perhaps even unconsciously, to fit a preconceived thesis.

It may not be particularly surprising that tribal peoples are viewed disparagingly. Perhaps most societies, including tribal ones, think those who live differently are somehow inferior to them, that their own homeland is the best of all possible places, and that their way of life is better than others. Indeed, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this; it is just part of the glue binding a people together. The real problem with racism is that it goes further and leads to – and

is used to justify – hurting people. Where societies are portrayed as violent, it breeds violence against them. This can create the sort of situation I have described, where South American ranchers did not realize there was anything wrong in killing Indians because they were ‘like animals’ – a statement undoubtedly made in all honesty. The same view was frequently echoed in many places until recently, and still is in some, such as in West Papua. The anthropologist’s image of the Indians’ ferocity was even cited as a reason why Yanomami-run projects should not receive British government funding in the 1990s.

Those who reject the ideas of savagery, stupidity or childishness, can still adhere to less obvious forms of racism, which may be even more insidious, because they can appear much fairer. It is frequently argued, particularly by those who stand to make money out of mines or dams, that a tribe should not be allowed to prevent resources being extracted which could benefit the wider majority, or that they should not be entitled to more land than other poor people. But neither of these assertions is fundamentally any different to the arguments used to justify nineteenth century colonialism: why should Africans not give up their resources when more advanced Europeans could make better use of them? Why should a few thousand Aborigines occupy Australia, when England and Ireland needed room for their own, ‘more advanced’, folk?

The answer was, of course, because Europeans thought they were superior to others; it was a conviction substantiated with the soundest science, or so they firmly believed. Darwin’s theory of evolution lay behind much of this. Whilst it undoubtedly accounts for some differences, it is often used to justify false hypotheses. It is important to explain this in more detail.

Darwinian selection has played an important role in the physical appearance of 'races'. For example, exposing the skin to sunlight stimulates it to produce the principal source of vitamin D that is vital for health. A pale skin works better than a dark one in less sunny climates because it creates more of the vitamin. In fact, dark-skinned people who now live in the north of North America, for example, are particularly susceptible to vitamin D deficiency, and this can lead to heart disease and other problems. As prehistoric humans moved into northern Europe and Asia, natural selection favored those with paler and paler skins, because they were producing healthy levels of the vitamin.

Whether one person is darker than another, or has healthy levels of vitamin D, are statements of simple fact. But to argue that one 'race' is more or less 'intelligent', 'civilized' or 'barbaric' – as Darwin himself did – is nothing more than personal opinion and prejudice: people neither agree on what these terms mean nor how to measure them. Darwin was right about the effects of natural selection on the body, but entirely wrong about thinking it led to his own race's superiority over others. That 'superiority' came not from scientific evolution, but from force of arms and the willingness to use them.

Certain 'races' do tend to do better than others in, for example, IQ tests, but this is only because the papers measure something one particular group of people does well. All this is obvious, but is still used to bolster archaic and racist views. Amazon nomads who do not count higher than three are unlikely to excel in high school mathematics! Were tests contrived by the nomads to establish who can provide their society with the most food, then Ivy League or Oxbridge professors are equally unlikely to impress.