

If we trace back any civilization to its original founders we are usually led to a state of society which is very far from being civilized, but which is probably also very far from being primitive. At least their culture exhibits a number of quite well defined peculiarities which are certainly not common to all the uncivilized people of the world. The examples of this state of society of which we have the clearest information are, first, the barbarians of northern Europe who from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries were over-running and occupying the European part of the former Roman Empire, and of whom we obtain the clearest pictures in the Icelandic Sagas, and in a short description of the Northern Barbarians, under the name of Germans, by Tacitus. The second group are the camel owning Bedouin of the Arabian desert, who, in the seventh century to whom are due the religion and the literary language of the Islamic civilization, and who, in an astonishingly short time, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, overran and occupied the southern and eastern portions of the Roman Empire, from Spain to Syria, in addition to the whole of the Persian Empire as far as India western India and Central Asia. Similar invasions of Arabs are suspected of having caused earlier revolutions in the history of the Near East. At least ~~that~~ such seems to be the cause of the foundation of the Early Empire in Babylonia c 2000 B.C. but of such events we can scarcely hope ever to know more than the mere outline, whereas, of the history of the Islamic movement we have particularly full and trustworthy accounts.

A third people who evidently belong to

the same group of cultures are the Homeric Greeks, who may be taken to represent a comparatively early wave of those Northern intruders who broke up the ancient Aegean civilization and laid the foundation of the dominant peoples of the later Greco-Roman civilization. This culture we find, pictured from within, in the poems traditionally ascribed, by later and more civilized Greeks, to Homer. But, lest it should be thought, as it was thought by many learned classical scholars of a hundred years ago, that because Homer often deals with magical events and mythological personages, therefore we cannot draw from his pages a substantially truthful picture of the state of society of his own time, or of ~~that of his~~ the ~~immediate~~ preceding generation or two; I ought to insist upon the completeness with which archeological research has recovered the relics of the Homeric period, and verified the reliability of the pictures left by Homer.

If to the Norse, the Arabs, and the Homeric Greeks we add the peoples of the Steppe Deserts of Central Asia, who occasionally appear in History under such names as Turks, or Tartars, or Moguls, we shall have listed the main examples of the type of culture to which I wish to draw attention. There are in addition somewhat striking similarities to be found among the Berbers of the Western Sahara, and more remotely, among the Polynesians of New Zealand and the Pacific Isles.

In attempting to describe the temperamental and moral qualities in which the peoples of these barbarous cultures are so strongly contrasted with civilized peoples, it is worth while to bear in mind one particular fact respecting moral ideas in general. Moral ideas are not personal or individual, but are shared by the

whole group or society to which they belong. They are the bonds of society; and a personal originality or idiosyncrasy, which might be tolerable in matters of scientific theory or of aesthetic taste, is usually intolerable in ethics. We thus find it far easier to understand of another race that they hold different ideas from ourselves about astronomy or architecture, while the similar fact that they differ from ourselves in their moral outlook is liable at once to kill our sympathy, and even to benumb our understanding. One of the essentials of anthropology is the necessity of obtaining a clear understanding of ideas and practices which it would be merely shocking to discuss as possible alternatives to the ideas and practices of our own people.

There is, among the cannibals of New Guinea, a story of a certain great and good man, Dako-Dako, who by persevering endeavour discovered the great truth, of how much better it was to eat your enemies, than to eat, for example, a friend, or a neutral stranger. This great truth is the central moral of the story which bears his name, and I trust I shall not be accused of any lurking sympathy for the objectionable practices of this people if I say that the story of Dako-dako is told by the Papuans to their children with as much moral sincerity as any which we may have heard from our own grandparents.

The barbarian people with which we are concerned were not cannibals; but in other ways their temperament and their moral ideas differed so strongly from those of their civilized descendants, as to make it no easy matter to apprehend their point of view. To feel at all confident that you understand them you must soak yourself in the Icelandic Sagas, or in the

poetry of Pre-Islamic Arabia, or in the Homeric Poems, especially the Odyssey, taking care to concentrate attention upon the persons of the story, and to ignore entirely any peculiarities of grammar or diction, such as may be the chief interest of the subject to the professional scholar. I believe the atmosphere is best conveyed by using English translations only, and trusting entirely to the translator to convey the meaning of the original. Such a course of reading has many advantages besides that which I am after, of gaining a sympathetic understanding of the point of view of barbarous peoples. Incidentally it brings one in touch with <sup>quite</sup> the finest literature in the world, and enables one to view the progress of human history in an entirely new perspective. All that I can hope to do is to convey a few of the salient features of the social organization and mental disposition of these peoples.

A central fact in all of these cultures is the blood-fund, and <sup>or</sup> the attitude with which the blood-fund is regarded. In ancient codes of law the blood-fund appears as the "Lex talionis", "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". But this is a very staid formulation of a spontaneous custom, which must have existed in every case for thousands of years before it was so formulated. I know only two successful attempts to express the passionate feelings which actuate the blood fund in practice. One is that it is regarded as a matter of conscience, that the avenger has a mordant feeling of wrong-doing, of cause for personal shame, until he has wrought just vengeance. The other comparison is with a physical need, comparable to some physiological craving to satisfy a dominant instinct. We can, I think, appreciate the

force of the incentive by imagining a strong physical passion fanned by a conviction of right and justice.

We can easily understand how such a custom gives coherence to the tribe, clan, or kindred group within which the duty of blood-vengeance is binding. The rights of each man are guaranteed, primarily by the strength of his clan. A clanless man, or as the old Welsh laws called him, a kin-wrecked man, who by some wrong-doing has lost the support of his kindred, has no recourse but to become a client, or dependent hanger-on, of some powerful group of free tribesmen. The good of the kindred group is the first consideration of every worthy man. The ties of family and of nationality are united in one moral obligation. Alongside of this type of tribal organization we find uniformly a considerable measure of communism in respect of personal property. Rights of inheritance are recognized to the whole kindred group, though, perhaps, unequally. Elaborate rules govern the distribution of booty obtained in war, or, what may be regarded as another form of the same thing, of blood money extorted from the enemy. In a sense, though not perhaps always completely, the whole clan must be regarded as a single economic unit.

Such a state of society could not exist among any people for a prolonged period without giving rise to great differences of social status. Powerful tribes, strong in numbers, and free from internal discord keep their cattle from mottation and enlarge their borders at the expense of their neighbors' grazing grounds. Broken remnants of weak tribes become clients and retainers of the stronger. Captives in battle, chiefly perhaps, from the ranks of clients may be spared as slaves. The difference

in rank was so clear to the Norse that they could believe that Jarl, carle, and thrall were the product of three separate acts of creation. Yet there is at least one case in the sagas of a thrall who was once a man of high degree; though there is no sign that ~~there~~ <sup>he</sup> had the least chance of ever regaining his status. It may be remarked that among the Polynesians, who seem to have carried their respect for pedigree to an extreme, the captive in battle falls at once to the level of a slave, and no other status will be accorded to him, even if he escapes, and reaches his own kindred.

The <sup>dominance</sup> importance and coherence of the tribal group, which is, of course, subdivided into sub-groups and families of very different importance, seems to be the central factor in causing the very great influence of women in all the barbarian societies with which we are concerned. It is a commonplace that the women of the Homeric poems enjoyed a standing among their men-folk much superior to their later condition in Greaco-Roman Society. The contrast between the condition of Oriental Women and those in Europe in the middle ages and until recent times, has led to the misconception that the subjection of women was introduced by Arab conquerors, and is a characteristic ~~to~~ of their race. In reality the seclusion of women and the employment of Eunuchs in the households of the great, were acquired by the Arabs in the conquered ~~greek~~ provinces; while in Pagan Arabia women of free birth seem to have exerted an influence only comparable to what we find them doing in the Norse Sagas. In both societies the initiative in such an important matter as blood vengeance was ordinarily taken by the taunts by which the women of the tribe compelled immediate action. Their

influence in this respect was naturally great, merely by reason of the impulsive character which is common, I believe, to all primitive peoples, but in the tribal societies of which I am speaking women exert an additional political influence through being the bonds by which, in a network of intermarriage, the various sub-groups of a tribe are bound together. One may almost regard the women as the living embodiment of their tribes, and the men as no more than animate weapons which they hurl against each other.

I suggest that it is in the conditions of such a tribal society that we can understand the evolution of one of the most remarkable attributes that mankind exhibits, I mean of heroism. The idea of heroism is of profound emotional importance, and the history of heroic races of men is the better part of human history; but it is worth while to consider the phenomenon quite abstractedly as though it were of no importance to us or to our forefathers. Biologically, how could such an attribute as heroism ever be evolved? Its existence <sup>requires</sup> involves the willing sacrifice of personal survival to an impulse, an idea, a worthy end remotely possible. Those who possess it must perish young in any society involving much bloodshed, more frequently than those of a more cautious disposition. But it is just in these barbarian societies that heroism flourishes, their last phases linger in historical memory as "Heroic Ages". The bloodshed and frequent early deaths do not succeed in exterminating the heroism.

Viewed abstractly great things and little things may have much in common. I will suggest the only parallel that I can find in the animal kingdom which seems to resemble the evolution

of heroism, is the evolution of bitter, unpleasant or nauseous taste in caterpillars. It is a widely accepted fact that many groups of butterflies, although conspicuous and easy to catch, yet escape destruction by birds, owing to their unpleasant flavours. But how can such unpleasant flavours be evolved, seeing that an insect which tasted a little worse than others of the same species, could gain no advantage over them. For however abominably it tasted this fact would only be known if it fell a victim. The explanation which seems most satisfactorily to account for the evolution of a character of this kind is that the distasteful groups acquired their objectionable flavour in the caterpillar rather than in the butterfly stage of their existence. Many caterpillars are also conspicuous and apparently nauseous to the taste, and these, I understand, are also always gregarious in their habits. They feed in numbers on the same plant, and doubtless these groups are often brothers and sisters from the same batch of eggs. If, now, one of these groups had hereditary characteristics, favouring the development of a particularly unpleasant flavour, that particular group would gain added protection against feeding birds; for if one happens to be taken the enemy is very unlikely to take another. The individual is sacrificed, but the group bearing the hereditary characteristics of that individual has an increased chance of survival.

The same argument applies with very little modification to the survival of heroism in closely knit, warring tribal societies, especially if these are characterised by the blood feud. It is the heroes



kindred who increase at the expense of less heroic strains.  
And this fact is brought home to us the more forcibly  
when we realize that the immediate aim of combat  
is prestige rather than material gain, the material  
advantages follow more easily when the prestige  
of the tribe is already established. The immediate  
prize is fame and glory.