

32. Civilization

A tribe of cannibals begins the path to civilization

One can readily understand the feelings of revulsion and disgust we felt upon hearing how Ockabunga killed and ate his friend, Doctor Lewis Berger. Indeed, that is how I felt as a longtime friend and student of the great Doctor. But as an anthropologist trained in Doctor Berger's tradition, I must try to see the event from the point of view of Folijot culture, which leads me to conclude that to kill and eat his friend was, for Ockabunga, the supreme act of love; the climax to an intensely intimate relationship. One might even put it in Western terms by saying that Ockabunga took Doctor Berger “into his bosom.” Admittedly, this is a little farfetched because in Western Culture the saying is meant to be symbolic, whereas in Folijot culture the “taking in” is actual.

I anticipate that this observation leaves me open to the charge that I am judging Folijot Culture as “less developed” than Western Culture in the sense that the Folijot are unable to separate the symbolic from the real. I hasten to reply that indeed I consider that they have not made this distinction, but that there is absolutely no basis whatever to claim that the splitting of these two, as has occurred in Western Culture, is either “progress” or desirable. The trouble in Western Culture — and many theorists as well as myself have noted this — is that we have lost contact with the core roots of our existence, the granite of our natures, that our lives have become too abstract, devoid of real meaning. This is the source of our alienation, dis-ease, unhappiness.

One need spend only an hour talking with Ockabunga to see the truth in this assertion. The simplicity with which he sees the world, the clarity of his mind, the almost clairvoyant look in his eyes. He and his fellow warriors suffer no complexes, alienations, guilt. They live at one with nature and each other. The fact that they happen to be head-hunters and cannibals is mostly incidental. In fact, I would argue that in many ways their cannibalism has a most positive effect on their culture. It keeps them tied to the concrete, real meaning of existence which is the cycle of life and death: by eating the corpse, they gain sustenance

from death. Life in this sense is brought into direct dependence on death, so that there is no impossible duality between Eros and Thanatos as there is in Western Culture, where we are so infantile in our denial of death, to the point that we deny life as well.

When I first followed Ockabunga to his straw hut, the one in which he and Doctor Berger had lain together for almost three years, my mind was overcome by the terrible anticipation of seeing Doctor Berger's preserved head. In fact, I almost withdrew from the entire expedition because I was so frightened that I would lose control of myself. My mind buzzed with all the possible things that my body could do to me. I might vomit uncontrollably; I might cry; I might attack and kill Ockabunga; or I might direct the soldiers, who were accompanying me, to kill him. I knew, as an anthropologist, that I must not do any of these things.

“Sit down,” said Ockabunga, and I dropped cross-legged onto the straw mat outside the hut; the exact place where I imagined Doctor Berger had reposed many times.

“Thank you,” I said, looking around for the Doctor's head among the others that hung down from the eaves of the hut by thin strands of hair.

“Doctor Berger was my good friend!” grinned Ockabunga, rolling his eyes.

“He was my excellent friend also.”

“He teach me very much.”

“He taught me a lot too.”

“He teach anatomy, but not understand.”

“Why not?”

“We try. Nothing there. No electricity.”

“I don't understand.”

Ockabunga went into his hut and returned with the dried but recognizable head of Doctor Berger. He threw the head to me, forcing me to catch it. To my surprise, instead of reacting with tremor, I was instead fascinated and suffered a compulsion to rub my hands lightly over and over the surface of the Doctor's head. Over and over, I turned it around and around in my hands, feeling the eye sockets, the hard shiny surface. There was something about the touch of it that I couldn't help liking. Saliva even started to run in my mouth, although I was certainly not hungry.

“You see, we make hole, take out brains, no electricity.”

Ockabunga reached forward to take the head from me to show where he had opened the cranium. But I wouldn't, couldn't, let it go; had to keep rubbing it. Ockabunga then reached for his spear, and I suddenly came to my senses and dropped the head as though it had become quite hot. He examined the point of his spear.

“This spear kill good Doctor here,” Ockabunga grinned as he pressed his index finger to my chest. I smiled and had to fight the notion that slipped into my mind: that this guy was a goddamned Primitive Savage! A heretical thought I know! But I confess it in order to make known the terrible temptations to which we scientists are sometimes subjected. One of the soldiers stepped forward menacingly. I let him stay there.

Although I'd learned a lot from Doctor Berger, I've learned a lot more by myself. It's one thing to love these beautiful natives, but it's another to be permissive and protective of them. I wasn't going to let this guy boss me around like he had Berger because the fact of the matter is that I have worked out an unassailable position as regards these different cultures. If you subscribe to the view of the cultural relativists — pioneered by the great Doctor Berger, and now largely adopted worldwide in modern anthropology — it follows that the only thing that counts is how powerful one culture is against another. For example, the Folijot Warriors feast mainly on another neighboring weaker culture; they take it for granted, both the Folijot and the tribe whose members they eat. It's a concrete fact of nature if you understand me. It follows, therefore, that if my culture is stronger, it's only natural that it takes over the Folijot. This is why I came on this expedition with soldiers. It may well be that the Folijot, once very happy, will become unhappy now that they have been brought into contact with the West. This is not to say that the influence of the West is “bad.” It is simply to note the facts of relativism: one's happiness can only be evaluated relative to another. And it is the one whose interests dominate who will be happiest.

It might be argued that this will lead to the destruction of Folijot culture. That may well be so. But who are we as scientists to interfere with the inevitable march of history? To do so is to play God. Dr. Berger in many ways played God by protecting the tribes he discovered because he dared to decide which culture should survive and which one not, while all the time claiming that every culture was as “good” as any other. He was, however, a

weak God and suffered a weak God's very ancient fate. I, on the other hand, am a purist. I am determined to allow all events to play themselves out. We must not impose our values on history, and as well, science is a part of history and must be allowed to take its place.

The grant that I received from the A.I.C.F. (American Inter-Cultural Foundation) was substantial. It will allow me to study these natives in far greater depth, and with much greater precision than was ever possible. And, because it will be an open study, my data, in contrast to Doctor Berger's, will be verifiable. Briefly, the research design is as follows.

First, my research assistants will live among the Folijot, participating in head hunting and eating human flesh. We consider this to be absolutely necessary as a preliminary exercise so that we are sure we understand the content of Folijot culture fully. The field workers will then interview (using, of course, a standardized structured schedule) those whose heads are about to be severed, to obtain their attitudes to life and death.

Next, comes the most crucial and innovative step in the research. We will randomly assign members of the tribe into two groups: one group, the control, we will leave alone. The other group, after we have interviewed their potential victims, we will instead provide the potential victim with the opportunity to kill his assailant. (The exact method has not been adequately worked out. We would prefer a gun, which would do the job quickly and cleanly, but the problem with this is that the victims would have to be selected in advance and taught to use the gun, thus introducing an extraneous factor into our carefully controlled research design). Then we will immediately interview the would-be assailant as to his attitudes to life and death. One can see that this experimental intervention creates a situation of crisis which we consider to be very conducive to interview response depth. We have termed it the "generative crisis technique." After the "victim" has killed his "assailant," we will then re-interview him to check whether his attitudes to life and death have changed. One can see that the research design is quite complicated, but very rigorous, and, most important, achieves a blend of two heretofore competing approaches to research: the experimental method is applied in a real life setting.

It will be seen that an experimental intervention is also an

attempt (unashamedly, I might add) to introduce a distinct change in the dynamic structure of Folijot society. It introduces the notion of reciprocity—that is, if you kill someone else, you must expect to be killed in return. The Folijot, while remaining warriors, become no longer predators, but rather kill with the expectation of being killed.

Thus we have introduced the rudiments of a just society.

