

Civilization as Hubris*

Perhaps the most interesting historians from Herodotus to modern times have been inspired by the idea that understanding the past can help us understand the present; and I suspect that, just as in the therapeutic process where the individual needs to understand the origins of pain and dysfunction in order to transcend them, also at the social level, overcoming the patriarchal condition may require that we understand its origins.

Just as we often forget our early infancy, we have forgotten our prehistory, and it seems improbable that we will find any remnants of ruins that will bring it back to life. Unless the bare and isolated facts uncovered by archaeology and mythology are enough to satisfy our thirst for knowledge and we insist on formulating a vision, we need to interpret the incomplete data that we have. This is my excuse to present in this chapter conjectures and interpretations from incomplete evidence that may well be impossible to prove. But since we need to understand, and since we cannot know what really happened five or six millennia ago, we must imagine, and today's archaeologists look approvingly upon the reconstructions of our prehistory proposed by some novelists that have written of the upper paleolithic or of the Celts. I here undertake, then, to imagine the origin of patriarchal society may have been on the basis of more information than that which was available to Tótila Albert.

It is believed that women invented agriculture. Since planting and harvesting seems to have been originally a women's realm, it is understandable that these activities and knowledge gave women economic power at a time when humans shifted from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle. And it is easy to imagine that such economic power (along with the voice of the community, for the sedentary world seems to have been closely knit together through the bonds among women) the feminine mind had an exceptional opportunity to influence the culture.

I will here attempt to communicate the theory that, soon after becoming more human during a period of cultural flourishing—that probably corresponded to the early Neolithic—in the late Neolithic or during that mythical “Bronze Age” that preceded the urban revolution—mythical heroes who were in a certain sense semi-divine beings made their entrance on scene, inculcating us with an aspiration for the superhuman. As a result, we came to neglect and scorn all that was merely human, and thus turned increasingly daemonic or pathological. We progressed and at the same time we degenerated as the superhuman stature of our civilizers not only made us greater, but also grandiose—and hence smaller.

Many different things have been said about the rise of patriarchal civilization after the matrilineal era about six thousand years ago in the “Fertile Crescent”.

We know that the invention of irrigation introduced a new stage in the intensification of agriculture, not only because it was now possible to feed a much larger population but also because men now worked in the fields. It is believed that their greater physical strength that enabled them to plough the land may have been the beginning of the transfer of economic power from women to men in the late Neolithic era.

*A fragment from the chapter with this name in *Civilization, a Curable Disease*.

Just as women's economic power had favored the development of the maternal spirit in the culture, endowing us with greater care in our relationships to each other and the earth, it is possible that the transfer of this power to men not only helped them gain dominance, but also caused the masculine spirit, oriented toward the transcendence of the natural order, to prevail. This would lead to the development of astronomy and writing and deepen our intuition of a cosmic celestial order revealed through the movement of the planets and stars. Yet the development of proto-science, surely favorable to survival from the beginning, seems to have been soon recruited in the service of masculine power and dominance.

The birth of civilization as we know it seems mysterious, difficult to explain solely as a response to the factors such as the challenge of climatic changes, the need to organize the community, and the surplus of agricultural production (about which so much has been written in the academic secular world). We feel as if each civilization has emerged from some kind of spiritual inspiration, and already during its earliest period has manifested in full splendor.

Ever since Plato, some have thought that the Egyptian and Aegean civilizations inherited a legacy from a prior and lost civilization, and in the case of Egypt it is particularly difficult to explain how such a high civilization, with its astronomy, its medicine, and its construction technology, could have risen without any apparent prior evolution. Moreover, signs of water erosion on the Sphinx suggest that it may have existed for millennia before the great pyramids.

Some have thought that in the case of the Egyptians the influence came from lost Atlantis, and in South America too the Mayans and the civilization of Tiahuanacu pose a riddle. As for the monumental fortress of Sacsahuaman, usually attributed to the Incas, it is impossible to imagine how it could have been constructed during the short life-span of the Inca empire and before the arrival of the Spaniards. Made of stones weighing more than two hundred tons, brought from distant quarries by inconceivable means, and carved in such a precise and complex fashion before being fitted into the huge walls, one cannot help suspecting a technology that even today seems so advanced that it has prompted some to believe in the intervention of extraterrestrials. And is this bizarre sounding idea any different from what the Greeks thought when they imagined a "heroic era" in which demigods lived among humans?

Vestiges of the legendary Atlantis have yet to be found. Yet aside from the possibility that evidence of an ancient civilization in the still unexplored region of the sunken delta of the antediluvian, pre-Sumerian Mesopotamia or in Indian Ocean may turn up, one can imagine that at the dawn of civilization certain beings (visitors from a remote civilization or not) were possessed by a "divine spirit", or demonstrated a level of consciousness that made them appear to their contemporaries as living gods—a combination of extraterrestrial and supernatural. This is why the legends that ascribe the origin of civilization to certain "civilizers" such as Osiris or Quetzalcoatl seem credible. Could such cultures have arisen from a contagion of consciousness from individuals who had manifested a divine inspiration still unknown by prehistoric shamans? An inspiration seeming to come from 'celestial gods' as they have been called by way of contrast to that of the "chthonic gods"? From a transcendent and masculine God in contrast to the mother-like and immanent divinity of nature?

Yet there is no doubt that already in the time of the Great Goddess, Europeans knew the mystery of the resurrection, which they symbolized through the apparent death of nature in winter and the return of life in spring, as well as through the lunar cycle. And if already during the matristic era this mystery of the great journey of the soul (or path to the supreme state) had been known, we can ask ourselves, what else did those heroes, who went down in history as the sons or messengers of celestial gods, discover? I suspect that their unprecedented glory was not a reflection of a more elevated consciousness, but rather a combination of pre-scientific knowledge and what is expressed in an answer the Sufi saint and Afghan chieftain—Jan Fishan Khan¹, an ancestor of Idries Shah—gave to the British authorities about certain demonstrations of excitement.

My great-great grandfather, Sayed Jan -Fishan Khan, was invited to India and a great military display was put on for him.

It was intended to illustrate to this independent Afghan chief that the warlike capacities of the British Empire were such that it would be to his advantage to respect it.

An artillery officer was attached to the Khan at one point, and he shouted enthusiastically, drawing the chief's attention every time the shells hit their target

This man and several others were subsequently invited back to Paghman, to be the guests of Jan -Fishan Khan.

As they were sitting at the banquet a man came up to Jan-Fishan Khan and said something. As soon as he had answered him, Jan-Fishan turned to the British officers and said, apparently in excitement: 'Did you hear that?'

'What did he say?' they asked.

'It is not "what did he say",' said the Khan, 'but the fact that I understood him and he understood me!'

The officers were nonplussed.

The following day, Jan-Fishan Khan took his guests on a tour of his stables. He pointed out some horses.

One of the horses was being fed. 'Look, how he eats!' roared the Khan.

Another was being exercised. 'He can actually walk, and run!' the Khan exulted, clapping his hands.

The visitors thought that their host must be mad.

They were unable to fathom his extraordinary behavior until he had to say, as they were leaving: 'You have seen, gentlemen, if you have guns which do exactly what they were designed to do – hitting the target – I, too, am surrounded by things which also appear to be fulfilling their function quite adequately. What I have learned from you is to get excited about it.'

[The Artillery, *Caravan of Dreams*.]

¹ According to Idries Shah, his descendent, as told in his book, *Caravan of Dreams*.

The phenomenon Jung discovered and called “inflation” has long been known in spiritual traditions as an exaltation of the apprentice—a “holy madness” that is a prelude to “contraction” or the equivalent of a descent into the fires of hell that comes before we achieve true spiritual maturity.

When in the eighties I was invited to participate in a study group that turned into a conference about conversion and coercion in the new religions and sects of the seventies and eighties, I spoke in it about how, given the freedom of the modern world and the intensification of the seeking spirit after the crisis of traditional ideology, it was not uncommon (and mostly in the therapeutic community) for people who had not followed a monastic discipline or even an explicitly spiritual path to show the signs of the “sorcerer’s apprentice syndrome”; and that it was precisely in this narcissistic grandiosity that one could find the origin of the new sects that were than provoking such antagonism among the followers of the traditional religions.

Not only in parables and myths (such as that of Osiris, the civilizing king who later descended into the kingdom of the dead), but also through the lives of the mystics the history of religion gives us abundant examples of how the “spiritual journey” goes through a phase of expansion and then one of contraction before bringing the wayfarer to his destination. Each of these involves a pathology, and the explanation for these (as I have shown in *Songs of Enlightenment: the Tale of the Hero in the Evolution of Western Poetry*), may be found in the fact that when the higher life of the mind is born—i.e. the ability for contemplative experience—the “small mind” (with its neurosis) persists and feels alternately stimulated and depressed. Inflation, then, is something like the exaltation of the personality when in close contact with something that transcends it—just as the later “night” consists of a corresponding devaluation of the personality in the face of spiritual intuition.

In the rest of this chapter I propose that not only the “new sects” but also the classical religions – have originated in the grandiose inflation of immature enlightenment. For it is clear that sectarianism is by no means a recent phenomenon, only one that becomes apparent through its clash with a “systemic sectarianism” whose similarly sectarian nature manifests in its antagonism toward the rival new sects. My contention is that the sectarian nature of traditional religiosity is derived, then, like civilization itself, from an archaic and grandiose inflation or exaltation.