

Primitive Mentality, Modern Civilization, and the Fate of Anthropology: A Conversation with Professor Christopher Hallpike



Professor Christopher Hallpike

by Geoffrey Clarfield

I discovered anthropology as a nineteen-year-old undergraduate in 1972. By that time, I had read a fair amount of academic history, which focused on leaders, politics, economics, and to some degree the movement of groups, such as the barbarian tribes who destroyed the Western Roman Empire or the dispersion of the Jews, my very own ancestors, after our conquest by the Romans.

I began to read about a field of study defined by the founder of anthropology, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, a nineteenth century English scholar who had christened this new initiative the “science of daily life” and then found myself reading

ethnographies, mostly of non-industrial or pre-industrial peoples.

Soon after, I discovered the French historical school called the "Annales," who in their own way had embraced Tylor's dictum and who had begun to write Western history "from the ground up." I therefore read Braudel's magisterial works on the Mediterranean, his three books on capitalism and daily life in Europe and at the same time slowly read others in his school, such as his teacher Bloch's classic two volume study of medieval society, while exploring anthropological works about contemporary tribal peoples.

What made anthropologists and social historians partners in a common intellectual project was their desire to explain "how we got from there to here," that is to say how we as a species went from pre-historic hunter gatherers to members of advanced industrial states in little over 12,000 years, and whether contemporary non-literate societies are in some ways a "window to the past" as to how we all once lived, felt, and thought.

A second and related question was, "How did we become modern and what of it?" That is to say, how did we break with the lifestyle and worldview of our medieval forebears and enter the modern world of science with its uniquely Western desire to understand our own society and culture and those of others.

While so many scholars and thinkers felt that the study of the remnant societies of the "underdeveloped world" was a side show of a side show, it was not. That is because in order to understand who we are we have to gain a better understanding of where we come from: ancient and prehistoric societies similar to those still tribal and marginal societies that survive in the "developing world."

Until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries academic historians did not seriously engage in these kinds of enquiries. If we could answer the question of how we got here

from there we would also hope that anthropologists could come up with a definition of human nature, or at least a taxonomy of social and cultural differences that could be ranked over time and space based on the multiplicity of field reports. A theory of cultural evolution could and should emerge from this kind of inquiry.

Although some anthropologists have taken up this challenge it has become complicated by anthropologists and “cultural ecologists,” scholars who have applied Darwinian theory to the rise of society, from hunter gatherer to astronaut. Today, neo-Darwinism is a thriving business and has given rise to an entire subfield of “evolutionary psychology,” whereby the round hole of human behaviour across time and space is more often than not shoved into the square hole of neo-Darwinian interpretations of society and culture.

This way of thinking also has its own public intellectuals, best selling superstars such as Professors Jared Diamond in the U.S., Richard Dawkins in the U.K. and now Yuval Noah Harari in Israel. But I am getting ahead of myself.

By my early twenties I was on a quest to understand society from two hopefully complementary perspectives; the social history of literate civilizations (the West, Islam, the Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian worlds) and the lifestyles of their peasants and that of the non-literate peoples, many of whom survived in marginal habitats and in the tropics, such as Sub-Saharan Africa. Disease had delayed the ultimate conquest of these places and peoples by Western powers until the late nineteenth century.

Simply put, I wanted to both experience and understand the difference between preindustrial and industrial societies, socially, cultural, and psychologically. I came to understand that one way of participating in this debate was to go out and live among a nonindustrial people as Jean Jacques Rousseau had recommended a mere two centuries ago. That is to say I

committed to just under two years of my life to "anthropological fieldwork."

By becoming an anthropologist, going to graduate school, shipping out to Kenya in the mid-1980s, and doing field work among a Cushitic speaking group of camel nomads in the desert lands of northern Kenya, I got my heart's desire. Among the Rendille, I received a firsthand exposure to daily life among a non-literate people over a period of just under two years of regular and extended field visits to one Rendille community.

It was difficult. The Rendille lived in a desert filled with snakes, scorpions, and hyenas. There were no phones or radio phones nearby. The area was under-policed and prone to armed tribal conflicts. There was and is malaria and other diseases and one had to deal with the vagaries of the national bureaucrats who watch over foreign researchers. (For example, the local administration once commandeered my jeep for famine relief during the 1984-5 drought.)

My pattern was to spend two weeks with my family in suburban Nairobi, the capital of Kenya and then go off for two weeks with my trilingual Rendille research assistant and translator (English, Swahili, and Rendille) and try to make sense of aspects of Rendille thought, culture, and social organization by living in one Rendille community, a settlement of about thirty households.

By that time, I had clearly understood the consensus of my professors who preached that people are the same everywhere but differ only in culture, that all cultures are somehow equally valid, and that by implication, they are all equally complex.

Therefore, unless you were a Marxist or cultural ecologist it was presumptuous to think of non-Western preindustrial peoples as fundamentally different from ourselves. By that time, the popular writer and public intellectual Claude Levi-Strauss had

made that argument in his book, *The Savage Mind* (1962)—whose basic argument is that there is no such thing!

I never trusted the consensus. I had read nineteenth century missionaries and explorers' accounts of foreign tribes and cultures and felt, somehow, that the world of "primitive peoples" was fundamentally different from our own. I had also read the comparative writings of the armchair anthropologist and French philosopher Lucien Levy-Bruhl, who argued that primitive peoples felt and thought differently than moderns do and whose discredited writings, based on fine nineteenth century ethnographers, I read in graduate school.

Because I was studying an East African Cushitic speaking people I had read articles by a British anthropologist, Christopher Hallpike, who had done field work among the Konso, a Cushitic people who live north of the Rendille in southern Ethiopia. He had later written a book called *The Foundations of Primitive Thought* (1979). In 1986 I lost a friend in Kenya, a fellow anthropologist, when I lent her a copy of this book. She told me with great passion that the book was "racist"!

Hallpike's book is a refutation of Levi Strauss's *The Savage Mind* and in many ways resonates with the conclusions of Levy-Bruhl. Having read most of the anthropological literature, both British and American, concerning non-industrial peoples, their customs, institutions, and thought patterns, Hallpike, going against the grain, argues that there is a fundamental difference between primitive peoples and moderns.

Hallpike says that non-industrial, tribal peoples may have wisdom based on life experience but, overall, they live in what Piaget calls a "preoperational world of thought" where magical thinking predominates (what Levy Bruhl once called "participation"). For a deeper appreciation of this book, I recommend the review by David Hick's written in 1981.^{[1](#)}

The Foundations of Primitive Thought is an enlightening and

glorious read for those who have swum in the anthropological literature for decades. It is a work that has not only been ignored by mainstream anthropology but vilified because of its political incorrectness.

Today, as we watch the “woke” decline of cultural and social anthropology in the universities of North America and the United Kingdom, non-Western people and their cultures are now often considered to be superior to the West with its so called white, male, phallogentric, imperialist, oppressive world view, whose offspring—capitalism, and Western science—still wreak havoc on the world of primitive peoples. The original sin of its slave owning ancestors is now replicated on the passive victims of the “third world.”

To argue, as Hallpike has and does, that there is something worthwhile about modernity, science, and democracy has now become heretical among present day anthropologists.

Christopher Hallpike is now retired and living in England (where he was born, raised, and educated). He has managed to take on the neo-Darwinians in an extended essay/book, the kind of public philosophical writing that once made Bertrand Russell famous, and is well worth reading called *Darwinism, Dogma and Cultural Evolution*.² He has also revisited and upgraded his own work on the Konso, and published a series of essays on modern anthropological myths called *Ship of Fools: An Anthology of Learned Nonsense about Primitive Society*.³

Putting his money where his mouth is he has written an extended treatise which has to a large degree answered the questions that I asked when I was nineteen. Is primitive society different from modern society and, above all, how did the West become unique and distinctive? That is to say, he has written about how we got “from there to here” called, not surprisingly, *How We Got Here—From Bows and Arrows to the Space Age*.⁴ This long and engaging tome includes a

professionally researched and balanced discussion of the differences between primitive and modern society, as well as the peculiarly Western rise of science and the rise of the West. The bibliography is extensive and up to date. The footnotes are often themselves clear mini lectures.

What bothers, intrigues, and delights me is how so often Hallpike deftly explains to me why so many of the scholars I have followed and cherished over the decades did not and do not get it quite right. It is painful at this age and stage in life to change so many of one's opinions, but that is the price we pay for participating in Western civilization, as should be obvious to those who have ever read Karl Popper.

One quiet sunny afternoon I managed to contact Professor Hallpike by phone at his house in rural England. I wanted him to answer some questions I had about his work and he graciously gave of his time.

Interview

GC: What has happened to social and cultural anthropology during the last twenty to thirty years?

CH: It has gone down hill. There is little intellectual honesty or philosophical rigor although here and there people do some good work. This is because there has been a change in the political and cultural climate we now live in. With the final end of colonialism there has been a parallel rejection of Western civilization and its achievements. Today the kind of ethnography and comparative work that I engage in, as they say, is "out of fashion." Anthropologists (or those who now call themselves that) are against the disciplined study of cultural and social differences, and attempt to deny that there is such a thing as primitive society, or cultural evolution.

This is supported by a climate of intellectual and administrative cowardice at the universities and funding

committees. In the short space of a few decades things have been turned upside down, a moral spinelessness and cowardice has penetrated Britain and the West, even in the most conservative institutions such as the Church of England to which I belong. Do not even ask me what I think about today's Archbishop!

For example, when I submitted my book on the evolution of morality the reviewer at the Oxford University Press advised rejection because my ideas were academically "unfashionable." In this intellectual climate you can understand that my writings on primitive mentality are hardly welcome in mainstream anthropology.

GC: What is wrong with the work of Richard Dawkins, Jared Diamond and other cultural materialists?

CH: They all suffer from one philosophical mistake. They believe, without evidence, that almost all social and cultural phenomena are somehow a reflection or expression of physical reality. They believe that this physical reality is "more real" than concepts and beliefs and the creativity of the human mind. They have overlooked the simple fact that humans have purposes and face problems. They adhere to variants of a simple materialistic reductionism. For example, the latest member to join this train is [Yuval Noah] Harari who argues that conventions are fantasies and therefore all societies are based on fictions. Any good lawyer can explain to him that these fictions are conventions, expressions of tradition and history, and allow society to function, like the provisions in a wedding contract.

GC: How can you describe and explain your developmental writings to an intelligent layperson?

CH: The important thing to remember is that more often than not when American cultural and British social or French "structural" anthropologists talk about mind or the mind of

primitive man they are inventing it. I mean they never refer to readings or theories that come from modern psychology, for example Piaget.

I believe that Piaget provided a rich and clear framework or paradigm for understanding the ethnographies of primitive peoples. His category of pre-operational thought explains so much about the manner and style in which primitives think and believe. It is the opposite of modern, academically and scientifically trained men and women. In this sense Darwinian evolution and its theories do not apply. My understanding therefore of culture and cultural change is interactionist.

GC: What is the key aspect of *Foundations of Primitive Thought*?

CH: That cognition is constructed by interaction with the physical and social environment. The mind is not an empty bucket filled by culture, nor is it a set of modules evolved in East Africa during the Pleistocene. Human beings are born with innate capacities to explore their surroundings but when there is no challenge, crisis, or need the process of cognitive growth goes on hold. Modern archaeology has not paid much heed to modern anthropology or to Piagetian psychology and they in turn often interpret artifacts and sites in a far too rational and ethnocentric way. They miss the fact that humans are born with capacities but the exercise of them can stop at certain points.

GC: Tell us about your own professional development.

CH: I come from a reasonably well-off family (in British terms) where we were expected to excel if we could. I went to Clifton College, a fine school where I got the ambition to become an academic, though I was not sure in what subject. I went up to Queen's College Oxford as a history scholar, but switched to Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, which I detested. But after graduation I had the good fortune to

discover social anthropology, which I studied with Evans-Pritchard, and Rodney Needham, two giants in the fast-developing field and who were focused on sub-Saharan Africa and the Far East. Evans-Pritchard wanted me to go to the Sudan, but I far preferred to do my fieldwork in Ethiopia among the Konso people.

Although Evans-Pritchard was much more famous than Rodney Needham, I found Rodney a much better supervisor and he became a lifelong friend. I managed to do good field work in Ethiopia, and my thesis on the Konso was published by the University Press. After a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Dalhousie University in Canada I did another two years of fieldwork in Papua New Guinea as a deliberate contrast to Ethiopia. After a few years of private research, during which I wrote *The Foundations of Primitive Thought*, I was appointed Professor of Anthropology at McMaster University in Canada. I took early retirement in 1998 and have lived well in the land of my birth where, as you can see from my website, I have not stopped writing despite the fact that I am “the odd man out” in my field.

GC: Does anthropology as you practised it have a future in England and North America?

CH: Right now, it does not. It has become a form of undisciplined social activism or extreme relativism. I suspect that traditional anthropology may survive among the newly free universities in Central and Eastern Europe but that remains to be seen.

GC: You appear to believe in modernity and Western civilization. What does that mean to you, briefly or in essence?

CH: First of all, I am not an atheist which puts me at odds with so many of my colleagues, and unsurprisingly I am also at odds with most other modern streams of thought in anthropology

as well. But I do push back as you can see from my books, essays, and website. Perhaps one day they will teach me [i.e. my work] in the universities again.

As a Christian I believe that there was and is much good in Christian Western civilization. I am one of those who, when he sees the carnage and corruption that has characterized and continues to characterize so many former British colonies and possessions, believes that “we left too soon.”

I know that this will grievously offend the “postcolonial” pundits of the day but events keep on showing that they are wrong. In a place like southern Ethiopia the spread of Christianity has allowed tribes that were once at daggers drawn, to begin to learn to be tolerant citizens of the developing democratic experiment that goes on in Ethiopia with its tragic fits and stops.

GC: Do you have any simple advice for young aspiring anthropologists?

CH: Yes. Read the classic ethnographies, the ones that are neither Marxist or Darwinian and that are based on serious empiricism.

GC: (When he mentioned this point I immediately thought about Evans-Pritchard’s trilogy on the Nuer of the southern Sudan, Godfrey Lienhardt’s work among the Dinka, Edmund Leach’s study of the *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, and some of Max Gluckman’s studies. Then of course there are numerous critical essays by Rodney Needham which are worth reading such as *Right and Left; Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification*.)

CH: But first young students must reject postmodernism and its handmaidens. These ideologies are destined to join the dustbin of history, just like the teachers of Marxist-Leninist thought in former East Germany.

Life is short and it is better to get on with it!

¹ David Hicks, "Comptes Rendu," *L'Homme* XXI, no. 1 (Jan-Mar, 1981): 121-141.

² Christopher Hallpike, *Darwinism, Dogma and Cultural Evolution* (Castalia House, 2020).

³ Christopher Hallpike, *Ship of Fools: An Anthology of Learned Nonsense about Primitive Society* (Castalia House, 2018).

⁴ Christopher Hallpike, *How We Got Here: From Bows and Arrows to the Space Age* (AuthorHouse, 2008).

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