

Primitives

Our species has been “human” for more than a hundred thousand years. We were different almost all of those years except the last few thousand. We had fewer needs certainly; or perhaps fewer wants. We did not know about wants. But somehow we knew about what is right, what is beautiful and true

The primitives I knew, briefly, probably superficially, fitted seamlessly in their world, a world of plants and trees, very few other humans, hardly any artifacts (man-made objects) and no technology, as we understand that term now. To me, as an outsider, what made the greatest impression was a sense of being part of the scenery. We, today, think ourselves characters on a stage: the world the stage, Nature is backdrop.

Primitive man does not feel himself apart from the world, he is part of it; a very intimate part. He cannot be separated from that world.

When I first met The People, as, of course, they called themselves, I felt as if I were coming home, as if these people were some long-lost relatives

Because that feeling was unexpected and unusual I could not help trying to figure out why I felt that. What was it about these little people, so totally unassuming that appealed to me so? After many years I think it must have been a “rightness,” an inevitability I sensed about them. They fitted seamlessly into their world, they were content, joyful even in what to any modern man must have seemed utter poverty. They were not beautiful as Polynesians are beautiful. They were not scrubbed, red-cheeked farmers from a prosperous part of Europe. But they had a rightness that was very much like the rightness of an animal in the wild.

They were the last wild humans, of course. They belonged, they were part of their environment as a lion is part of the desert, or a tiger is part of the jungle. You cannot take a tiger out of the jungle; a tiger in a zoo is no longer a tiger. Laurens van der Post writes that a Bushman dies when you take him out of his desert. He recounts a story of a Bushman put in jail: the next morning he is found dead. Medical examiners could not find a "cause of death"; Van der Post says about the Bushman that "they cannot be tamed". I felt the same about The People. If they were to be taken out of their environment, they would die.

A few times I saw them outside of their environment. The Malaysian Government made a little hospital for them, for instance. Planned with consideration, they were simple huts, families were expected to accompany a sick person, and cook their food, so that patients would feel at home. But the native-looking houses had concrete floors for hygiene. The doctor in charge was a wonderful man, who tried to be low key, "meeting them halfway;" as he liked to say. I appreciated the dedication of the doctor, but for me, seeing the People there was a bitter experience. They were in a daze, their eyes were glazed, not from tuberculosis, which would probably kill them, but because they could only be half aware of what all strange things were done to them. Taken out of their world, they had shriveled, the life had gone out of them.

In their own world they left hardly a trace where they walked, they did not destroy or even disturb anything in their environment. They were content with what food and shelter they could find and did not want more. They had no ambition to reshape their world, no desire to exploit the earth for resources other than what grew naturally. They lived *in* the world, not *on* the world, as we do.

That is what, to me, "primitive" means. People who are content with very little. If even the little is not available they move on. And if they cannot move on because we have claimed the entire world for our civilization, they die.

For a long time it has been important to me to live my life as much as possible as a primitive, an aborigine. Of course I know that I cannot really live the life of a primitive, because today, in order to survive, I need to be part of this modern civilized world, hard as that is. For now, I live as simply as the world allows me to live. I have a deep sense that primitive life is perhaps the only truly human life. Humans today have moved so far away from our forebears that we are hardly recognizable as human.

Can we go back? Of course not, evolution does not go back. Or does it, sometimes? What if we discovered, and accepted, that our evolutionary branch is a dead branch, about to fall off? Could we not choose to go back to somewhere earlier on the branch, closer to the trunk at least?

To live as part of the plants and animals of one's environment requires that you must learn patience, a way to meditate, and then to be aware. When I am aware, open to What Is, the earth is a miraculous place, where everything is related to everything else, and every being is part of another being, many other beings. Once I know that, then I could not destroy my environment, I could not possibly live other than very simply. And when more and more people feel human again, perhaps suddenly all of us will remember. We must learn again to be part of creation, not its pinnacle. Creation is One, there can be no hierarchy in All There Is.

One part of creation is not better or more important, and certainly not the boss of other parts of the same creation. Bosses and slaves are a cancer: one group of cells going to war against other cells in the same body.

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Forty thousand years ago. Try to imagine a thousand. then forty thousand! A long, a very long time ago, my forefathers and yours, painted art on the walls of caves, some of which survives to this day. Consider what that means: works of art have survived, intact, in their original form and matter, for forty thousand years!

Then realize that those "primitive" paintings are of a sophistication rarely matched and never surpassed. Those paintings show the world as it must have been forty thousand years ago, a world of large herds of many kinds of deer, of lions, snakes, and people. All drawn with a refinement that is uncanny. Animals are drawn with a few lines, but lines so exquisitely drawn that there is no question that the unknown artists who did

that were as great as Leonardo da Vinci. Those seemingly simple representations require a deep understanding of the essence of their subjects. What does it feel like to be a wild horse, or a lion? When a deer turns its head all the way back, the skin stretching tight, that is expressed with a line. A running horse moves its feet just so; a few lines catch the movement perfectly. In addition, of course, the state of preservation of these paintings says that the artists knew their craft, they knew the essence of the colored clays they used.

To me those paintings — and I have only seen them reproduced in books, but I have seen many!)— those paintings are of a purity and sophistication that I cannot find in modern art.

We know almost nothing about those people; all we know is these drawings in caves. Very few “things” survive for forty thousand years. But those drawings, those paintings survive.

What do they tell us about ourselves forty thousand years ago? That we were *sophisticated primitives*.

To me, sophistication (as it was understood when I grew up — yes, that is a long time ago) is a quality speaking of refinement. Refinement in anything, art, speech, behavior, morality. Refinement requires knowing the essence of an art, or the essence of a thing or a being or even a behavior. Refinement, and sophistication, are not qualities of the rich, as some of us think today. The affluent of today look for excess, not refinement.

Those primitive painters drew their world with a few strokes, applied with such mastery that they must have understood the essence of what they were painting. Only when I grasp the essence of a Lion, can I represent him with but a few lines, lines perfect, exactly right in thickness and power. Yes, that is sophistication.