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**DISTURBANCES IN THE DREAMTIME: ETHNOCENTRISM, XENOPHOBIA
AND THE ETHNIC *OTHERS* AS ANIMALS IN TRADITIONAL ORAL NARRATIVES**

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**Disturbances in the Dreamtime:
Ethnocentrism, Xenophobia and the Ethnic *Others*
As Animals in Traditional Oral Narratives**

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Introduction

Oral narratives have been employed by traditional indigenous peoples the world over for millennia. The fact that all humans tell, act out and enjoy narratives stems from our evolutionary legacy of living in hunter-gatherer band or tribal-level societies¹ for 99.9% of our evolutionary history. It was during this formative era in human evolution that people evolved the capacity to utilize storytelling as a vehicle for conveying large amounts of information. One of the primary functions of narratives has been to symbolically convey social and spatial identity, as well as the moral prescriptions and proscriptions that legitimize that identity.

When an individual engages in ethnocentrism and xenophobia such behaviors are directly tied to that person's perception of his or her group's social and spatial identity. That perception is formed through exposure to stories, rituals and symbols in the course of a lifetime. The universal leitmotifs of ethnocentrism and xenophobia that one sees in all human narratives, both traditional and modern, have their genesis in the universal

¹ Anthropologists recognize four levels of human social organization: bands, tribes, chiefdoms and states. There are qualifying characteristics such as demography, level of technology, settlement pattern, patterns of production and exchange, political organization, etc. that define the level a society is viewed as being within. It must also be remembered that this is a descriptive typology and not a normative one.

attributes of the evolved psychology of our species (Brown 1991, Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby 1992). It was a hunter-gatherer socioecological context characterized by chronic warfare that in great part selected and designed human psychology and behavior in our evolutionary past (Keeley 1996, cf. Chagnon 1997 for a contemporary example). The fact that humans universally exhibit ethnocentrism and xenophobia reveals that our prehistoric forebears were confronted with the inter-group violence and predation that occurs between neighboring tribal groups on a regular basis (ibid.). In fact, of the 71 traditional oral narratives I collected from the Dene Indians of northern Canada over a 15 month period, approximately 34% of them dealt with revenge raids and 27% of them dealt with female capture (cf. Allen 1997).

Traditional narratives in extant hunting and gathering societies often reference a time that has been characterized by some aboriginal peoples as the *Dreamtime*. The Dreamtime is a time of creation and change, a time of mystery where relationships between members of an in-group - i.e., the people doing the narrating - and the other entities in their environment are altered or affirmed. These stories are replete with examples of people having commerce with animals. While such narratives are subjectively interpreted by the people who are the narrators as literal, they can be objectively deconstructed to assess prevailing motifs that are embodied in the imagery and storyline.

The hunter-gatherer Dene Athapascans of Subarctic Canada, like other Subarctic hunter-gatherers in North America (cf. Millman 1993), live in a world that is actualized through dreams. They dream their hunts before they act, their spiritual leaders are dream prophets, and their narratives can be seen as representing the collective dreams of a

people. In fact, their everyday lives are perceived as the illusion whereas dreams and the consequences of those dreams are real. Upon close examination, one sees that their dreams and narratives are replete with violence, ethnocentrism and xenophobia (cf. Blondin 1990). One can only conclude that there truly are and have been disturbances in the Dreamtime.

In the following paper I will discuss briefly an anthropological analysis of the evolutionary bases of the ethnocentric syndrome. I will also present a traditional oral narrative collected in 1994 among the Dene Athapascans in the Northwest Territories, Canada which demonstrates some of the themes I have alluded to. The presentation of the narrative will be followed by a brief discussion.

Anthropology and Evolutionary Theory

Anthropologists now recognize that the social and spatial organization of small-scale traditional societies is similar to, and stems from, our phylogenetic heritage within the taxonomic Order of primates. The system of social organization that we spent 99.9% of our history evolving in is not very much different from the system of social organization employed by our nearest primate relatives - chimpanzees and bonobos. Bands of these apes occupy clearly demarcated and defended territories, and they exhibit an ethnocentric bias in favor of members of the in-group while at the same time exhibiting violent xenophobia toward members of neighboring groups. The only individuals who tend to be able to cross between group boundaries safely are post-adolescent females who are sexually receptive.

There is now mounting evidence that ethnocentrism and xenophobia peak among humans and our nearest primate relatives during adolescence (Irwin 1987). It is at this time that in-group marking and *badging* becomes very pronounced. Group-identity patterns, once established at this stage in an individual's development, tend to remain relatively fixed for the remainder of that individual's life. This process coincides with sexual maturation and seems to be directly tied to a migration out of the natal, or birth, group by sexually mature adolescents of either sex. Among chimps and humans it is the females who tend to migrate out of their natal group after sexual maturation. This out-migration at adolescence is a universal behavior among all species that is an adaptation which evolved to prevent inbreeding depression. It is a remarkable fact that among most primates it is usually the males who migrate out, leaving a matrilineal core in most monkey societies. But among chimps, bonobos, gorillas and humans it is the females who migrate out.

The irony is that intergroup aggression between primate societies with matrilineal cores tends to be less violent, whereas that between societies with cores made up of related males tends to border on what we might refer to as genocidal violence. Such male aggression most likely had its origin in the economics of sexual reproduction. This is to say, in species where the female invests the most time and energy into the offspring the value of females is high and they become the limiting factor on the reproductive success of males. The same, however, is not true for females, as is common knowledge in behavioral ecology (Krebs & Davies 1987). Female reproductive success is not limited by their access to males but rather by their access to somatic resources such as a prime feeding territory that contains food, shelter, water and safety from predators. Females

who invest heavily in offspring can almost always find a male to inseminate them. Males on the other hand must compete with one another for access to females, and this is why males tend to be statistically more violent than females in species that fit these criteria.

Among chimpanzees cooperating male kin remain in their birth group and defend a territory that contains quality somatic resources. These resources are the limiting factor on female reproductive success, and they therefore draw in females who have reached sexual maturity and are migrating out of their natal group. Related males then vigorously defend their territory against any intrusion by outsiders, to the point of patrolling boundaries, hooting and calling to invoke a vocal response from any intruders who may be near their border, looking for signs that indicate the presence of neighboring interlopers, and then practicing genocidal aggression on any out-group members caught trespassing (Goodall 1990).

Band and tribal-level societies among humans are structured along a continuum that obviously had its origin back in our common evolutionary past with chimpanzees. But this is not to say that modern humans who live in these societies are more primitive than any other modern humans. Rather, it is to say that the social structure and organization of contemporary small-scale human societies is more analogous to the types of societies within which chimpanzees and humans evolved.

In band or tribal-level hunting and gathering societies social status and roles are predicated upon and mediated by kinship, as is the case in chimp societies. Concomitant with kin relatedness is the symbolic delineation of space - a territory. Spatial identity and social identity are most often synonymous, and it is spatial proximity during the life histories of individuals that determines who will be recognized and symbolically labeled

as kin, friend or stranger, as well as what place will be labeled as home. Most animals use ritualized behaviors, displays and pheromones to symbolically delineate their territory and in-group identity. Humans, on the other hand, are different from chimps and other animals in that we employ overt symbols such as linguistic communication in the form of dialects and localized narratives, along with body marking and adornment to delineate in-group versus out-group identity. These territorial behaviors, that are in fact evolutionary psychological adaptations to past environments, are what underlie the universal expression of ethnocentrism and xenophobia in our species.

Narratives and the images associated with them are the primary symbolic mechanisms we humans have evolved to employ in the promotion of ethnocentrism and xenophobia. But narratives have also been the vehicle that has been employed to overcome an ethnocentric and xenophobic bias in our biological programming. Such narratives have always promoted the values of wisdom, tolerance and acceptance; and it is perhaps in the generation of such narratives that we find the key to overcoming the ethnocentrism, xenophobia and violence that is a part of our evolutionary legacy. Below is an example of a traditional Dene narrative that, while demonstrating ethnocentrism and xenophobia toward the animal *Other*, also reveals that it is kindness and tolerance that can turn those animal *Others* into human beings.

A Traditional Oral Narrative: *The Mouse People*

I spent 15 months from 1991-1994 conducting ethnographic field research among the Dene Athapascans in the Northwest Territories, Canada. During that time I collected 71 oral narratives that have been translated into English through the assistance of Dene

research assistants. The average age of the informants was 88 years, with there being 60% males and 40% females who participated in the project. A large number of these narratives had to do with inter-group violence and aggression. In fact, one of the elderly informants claimed, "In those times before the white men came, if someone killed your brother you must get a revenge before you cry. If you cry first he will kill you."

These narratives provide a glimpse into a lifeway and worldview that is rapidly diminishing on our planet, even for most extant indigenous peoples. All hunters and gatherers that now inhabit our planet are being pacified because they live within the boundaries of state-level societies. The lifeways of these peoples are also being radically altered by the introduction of new technologies, subsistence strategies and settlement patterns. They are rapidly becoming literate and a sad irony is that this means the end of a tradition where oral narratives are the primary repositories of information, as well as the means for teaching values and wisdom. Such narratives must be recorded, else they will become radically altered and die out due to the overwhelming momentum of civilization. What must be understood, though, is the fact that oral narratives, once written down, are no longer oral narratives. They become something else - a genre of literature. It is the combination of the narrative itself and the live performance that is adjunct to oral conveyance that imbues the meanings with life - in other words they are then dreamt and therefore become real. According to the Dene, the words then become *living words*.

The Mouse People

This story tells of long ago. There were two men married to two wives. One man was mean and the other was kind. The kind husband was always helping the wives with

their chores and so, of the two husbands, the wives favored him most. This made the mean husband more and more jealous until he finally came up with a scheme to get rid of the kind husband.

One day, with a wry grin on his face, the mean husband said, "Well my friend, it is fall time and that means it is duck season. So let us go for ducks at the traditional site by the ocean shore." The kind husband agreed and thought to himself that roast duck with fat drippings would be good.

When they arrived at the site the mean husband said, "In times past one could gaze out onto the ocean and sight ducks right away." So the kind husband took up a position and began scanning the ocean's surface for ducks. At this point the mean husband took up a piece of driftwood and clubbed the kind husband unconscious from behind. Then he bound him to a huge log and set him adrift on the ocean.

When the kind husband regained consciousness he saw the position he was in. It was no use to try and free himself. All he could do was to invite sleep. He counted four nights by the stars of the night while drifting, tied to the log.

When he awoke on the fifth morning he was washing against the shore in an unfamiliar land. Close by sat a mouse. So he called, "Brother mouse, come and chew the leather rope that has me bound to the log."

After the mouse freed him, he stretched himself until the stiffness had gone out of his body. He then followed the mouse inland. He ascended a ridge and when he topped the rise he saw below him a village. This was a village of mouse people who were overflowing with kindness. They welcomed the visitor with great delight.

The mouse people were very generous. The first night the chief offered the man two young girls to share his bed, but the kind husband thanked the chief and declined. He told the chief that he was already married to two very fine wives.

Day after day, week after week, the kind husband noticed that these people did not do any work of any kind. All they did was to feast one day and to dance and celebrate the next. It went on like this day after day until a day came when the kind husband observed people packing food along a path that descended from the hills back of the camp. The kind husband grew curious. He wanted to know where the mouse people were getting their food from.

One day he snuck out of the village on the back hills path. As he ascended the hill along the path he came upon a wondrous sight. Pairs of eagles' wings were tied to the tops of long poles that were leaning up against individual trees. He realized that the mouse people used these wings to fly when they went hunting.

He took a pair of wings down and tried them on. With no effort at all he was airborne. But as soon as he was aloft he remembered his respect for the mouse people, so he landed and took off the wings. He tied them back to their pole and put them back up the tree where they were.

One year had passed while the kind husband had been with the mouse people. It was fall season and he was longing for his two wives.

The kind husband went to visit the chief and he told him that he was longing to be with his own kind of people. The mouse people were sad that the kind visitor was going to leave them for they had come to know him as a good man and a friend.

Early the next morning the man decided this was the day he would begin his journey home. The mouse chief, speaking on behalf of his people, said to the kind visitor, "Since you have lived with us accordingly, I would like you to have this gift. It is a pair of eagle wings."

The man was overwhelmed at being honored with such a magnificent gift. The chief gave him instructions with the wings. He said, "Anytime you feel tired while you are crossing the ocean just say, 'fa na kun na ka' (rock, surface your peak)."

The man bid his farewell to the mouse people and took off on his long flight across the ocean. After a while he was getting tired, so remembering the chief's instructions he said, "Fa na kun na ka." A rock peak surfaced and he rested. It has been said that the kind husband rested four times on his journey back across the ocean.

As soon as he was nearing shore, the kind husband searched for familiar land formations. Soon he recognized familiar landmarks. It was fall season and this meant his evil friend and their two wives would be camped at the traditional duck-hunting campsite. Sure enough, as day follows night, he found his evil friend and his two wives at the traditional location. So the kind husband waited patiently for the evil husband to go hunting ducks.

Sure enough, the mean husband went for ducks. The kind husband waited until the evil husband was a good distance from camp before he swooped down and lifted him off the path.

The evil husband knew who his captor was without even looking up. He said, "My friend, spare me my life and I will let you have the two women."

Without answering the kind husband flew him out over the ocean. The kind husband dropped him and let him fall until he was just about to hit the water. Then the kind husband swooped down and caught him, this time taking him higher and dropping him again. The kind husband repeated this four times, each time going a little higher before he dropped the evil husband again. Finally, on the last flight, when he had taken him up very, very high, the kind husband released him and let him fall to his death.

The kind husband landed on a hill close by the duck-hunting camp. He took off his eagle wings, attached them to a long, slender pole and stuck them up in a tree. His two wives recognized him as he was approaching camp, and with open arms they ran out to welcome their kind husband home.

The eagle wings made hunting very easy. Every day the kind husband brought back moose or caribou. He would haul the game to the hill close by camp. Once there, he would butcher and pack the meat into camp. He did this day in and day out.

One day, after the kind husband came back from another successful hunt, the two wives started complaining to one another that all they did day in and day out was make dry meat and scrape and tan hides. They decided this had to stop for they simply could not process all the game their husband was procuring for them.

One of the wives said, "I have noticed that he always comes back to camp with meat on that path that leads to the hill close by camp." So the two of them stealthily followed the path to the hill.

The path led them to the top of a high hill. On top of the hill they found a pair of eagle wings attached to a long slender pole resting high up in a tree. The two wives realized that this was why their husband was getting so much game, he was using eagle

wings to hunt. So they took down the eagle wings and they squirted their breast milk on the feathers. Afterwards, the two wives returned the eagle wings to their roost on the long pole high up in the tree and then they returned to camp.

Early the next morning the husband went off hunting again. He took the wings down and put them on. He flapped the wings once, then twice, and then again a third time but nothing happened. He could not get airborne again because the breast milk had glued the feathers together.

So to this day and age, men must hunt by blood, sweat and tears. Men must now walk rather than fly so they cannot overwork their wives.

Conclusion

Traditional narratives that are stored within the minds of the last extant hunter-gatherer elders left on earth today may be one of our best windows into an understanding of the underlying causes of such universal phenomena as ethnocentrism and xenophobia. These narratives reveal a tribal world where the in-group is good and human, while the out-group is animal and base. In such a world morality often only extends as far as the boundaries of the in-group. Outside of those boundaries one is dealing with animals, animals who have no interest in preserving one's kith or kin. But occasionally a hero comes along in a narrative who is able to supersede normal limitations, one who is able to see past the base animal nature of the *Other* and recognize the nobility, dignity and humanity which all people share.

Ethnocentric and xenophobic motifs have their origin in what indigenous peoples refer to as the Dreamtime, a time of change, creation and epic adventures. The mistake

that is often made by Western scholars, though, is to characterize the Dreamtime as somewhere in a lineal past. Contemporary hunter-gatherers portray the Dreamtime as something else in their narratives. Rather than being lineal, time is cyclical in their narratives with a Dreamtime and a new narrative just around every bend. The Dreamtime and its narrative is here and now if we just dream it so. So let us dream, tell the tales, be kind and overcome our fears. In this way those animal *Others* just may reward us with their magical gifts.

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