

CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION IN NON-AGRICULTURAL SOCIETIES

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Chapter 5 of *The Dawn Of Everything* By David Graeber and David Wengrow examines cultural differentiation between the peoples of Northern California and the peoples of the Pacific Northwest (the “PNW”) in the centuries before the arrival of White people. They argue that societies define themselves by opposition to other nearby societies. This they call schismatogenesis, a term I discuss here. They use the term culture areas to describe areas where inhabitants share a similar culture.

Cultural differentiation is the process by which the culture of a group of people evolves over time to be less like their neighbors. For example, the people of Northern California did not adopt agriculture, even though they were aware of the practice through contacts with nearby people who grew maize, squash and beans. They themselves grew tobacco and a few other crops, and the lands they occupied would easily have supported the practice. Similarly, they did not adopt a fishing life, as their neighbors to the north did. This process extends to things that have obvious utility. One group of Alaskans refused to adopt Inuit kayaks, while the Inuit refused to adopt their neighbor’s snowshoe technology.

The authors do not offer an explicit definition of culture, but generally it means such things as “... characteristic customs, aesthetic styles,

ways of obtaining and preparing food, and forms of social organization." P. 171. It also includes concepts of the sacred, and moral structures including ideas about how humans should live.

The dividing line between the Northern Californians and the PNW is approximately at the Klamath River which flows from southern Oregon through northern California out to the Pacific. The authors prefer to think of the Californians nearest to this border as living in a shatter zone, where the two main culture areas meet. This area evolved its own culture, radically different from its neighbors to the North and somewhat different from its neighbors to the South and East.

The cultural differences between these two groups are profound, perhaps in part because they evolved over several thousand years. The PNWs lived on salmon and other fish. They were experts at wood carving; their totem poles and war canoes are magnificent. They were boastful and status-hungry. The staple foods of Northern Californians were tree products, nuts and acorns. They were hard-working, self-reliant and abstemious. They were obsessed with money. Their decorations were primarily textiles and basketry. The differences go on and on.

One central difference is that the PNW raided other tribes for slaves who were put to work so that chiefs and nobles were able to live indolently. The Northern Californians rejected slavery, presumably because they believed in self-sufficiency, and living off the sweat of other people would be an affront to their honor.

The authors attribute this to intentional choices by each group. We are not people who keep slaves says one group. We are not people who work like dogs to make porridge says the other.

The authors say that cultural differentiation is a dominant theme in the history of human societies:

Ever since Mesolithic times, the broad tendency has been for human beings to further subdivide, coming up with endless new ways to distinguish themselves from their neighbours. P. 166.

The authors believe that we do this differentiation intentionally; that we think about the ways we are not like others, and that we emphasize and expand on those differences. Over time this leads to vastly different cultures. The effects are both significant, as slave-holding, and seemingly trivial, as the use of chopsticks instead of forks.

The last section of Chapter 5 lays out three conclusions.

a) The authors recognize that there isn't just one cause for cultural differentiation. Economic constraints encourage or even necessitate certain choices. Language structures might play a role. But also, human agency ("the preferred term, currently, for what used to be called 'free will'" p. 206) plays a part. In a book primarily about human freedom, it seems reasonable to give human agency a bigger role than others might suggest.

b)

Slavery, we've argued, became commonplace on the Northwest Coast largely because an ambitious aristocracy found itself unable to reduce its free subjects to a dependable workforce. The ensuing violence seems to have spread until those in what we've been calling the 'shatter zone' of northern California gradually found themselves obliged to create institutions capable of insulating them from it, or at least its worst extremes. A schismogenetic process ensued, whereby coastal peoples came to define themselves increasingly against each other. P. 207.

Then they draw the broader conclusion that slavery is a perversion of domestic life, the opposite of care, nurture and love that characterizes the home.

c) They say that hierarchy and equality emerge simultaneously. The Northern Californians practiced a form of equality where status was solely the outcome of living in a certain way. The PNW had a hierarchy based on treasures and hereditary titles. The two groupings emerged together.

Discussion

It does seem that people want to find markers to distinguish themselves from other people and at the same time connect themselves to their group more tightly. This is a plausible explanation for the Alaskan groups who refused to adopt kayaks and snowshoes despite their utility. Maybe we can see it in the anti-vaxxers who risk a sickening disease and even death rather than separate themselves in any way from their political comrades. The need for connection overwhelms the rational consideration of the evidence, maybe?

Maybe we can see it in the Protestant Reformation. In Northern Europe the religious revolution begun by Martin Luther was a way for people to separate themselves from the corruption and greed of the institutional Catholic Church which was increasingly obvious and oppressive. The schismatics claimed to be returning to true Christianity.

At the same time, elites saw the utility in using the fervor of rejection of the Temporal Power of the Vatican as a way to strengthen their own positions as the leaders of rising nation-states.

The authors use language that suggests something like town meetings to make decisions about adopting cultural changes. But it seems likely to me that a good bit of this kind of separation is driven by the preferences of elites. For

example, Northern Californian elites show themselves through their accumulation of wealth by individuals. At death, wealth was destroyed, not passed to the next generation. These elites argue against slavery, and encourage others to work hard themselves, to be self-sufficient like the elites. This would provide a psychological boost to these elites and justify their choices.

On the other side, the PNW elites are identified by their hereditary wealth and titles, their prowess at war, and their their largesse in the potlatch. They use their own status and the glory of war to encourage the behaviors that benefit them materially.

I'm surprised that the authors don't identify the elites as a major driver in this kind of differentiation. We'll see this more clearly in future chapters.