

The Tribes Within: The Search for Identity in the Modern State

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A year or two ago A.A. Gill, restaurant and television critic of the London *Sunday Times*, lambasted the Scots. Since Scotland has had its own parliament, albeit giving autonomy to a degree but not independence from the UK and Westminster parliament, there has been a scramble for a Scottish identity. Gill derided the attempt to construct that identity. His point was quite correct in essence. In fact it was purely journalism, therefore quite polemic. Nevertheless, his message was indisputable. The Scots are an amalgam of different Indo-Celts, Germano-Celts, Nordic and pre-Celtic people. Among the list of more easily identifiable ingredients in this 'melting pot' we would find indigenous Picts, the Scots who came from Ireland, Vikings with their Danish, Norwegian and Swedish origins, Angles, Saxons, Normans (themselves descendants of Nordic Viking invaders who settled and intermarried in what is now Normandy in France) and a few small minorities that include, for instance, the descendants of Spanish survivors of the *armada* that set out to invade England in 1588. No doubt we could begin to consider where more recent incomers fit in this human 'stew', there have been Jewish communities for many hundreds of years, freed slaves of African origin became minority parts of the seafaring and dockside communities of Glasgow and Greenock at least two centuries ago, then we should account for migration from the Caribbean, Indian Subcontinent, Africa, Slavonic peoples, Irish, Italians and many others. Then there is the more recent influx of refugees and asylum seekers that introduce the element of peoples previously unable to leave their places of origin. In time, perhaps many generations ahead, they will mostly assimilate and gradually integrate into the dominant culture in their 'new' country.

So who are the Scots? This where it has become necessary for the Scots to popularise what is an essentially mythologised and reconstructed history as a route to finding identities. The recent popularity of a blockbuster film, *Braveheart*, starring Mel Gibson as William

Wallace served this purpose very well. It told the story of the Scots hero Wallace, his defeat of the English, his effective betrayal by Robert the Bruce who went on to become an even greater patriot and hero, ending with the heroic execution of Wallace by the English into whose hands he was treacherously delivered. With a few 'skips and jumps' we then need to move on a few hundred years to the attempt to recover the throne of Scotland by Charles Edward Stewart, better known as Bonnie Prince Charlie. With his defeat and retreat into exile in 1745 the Bonnie Prince helped create even more myths that are used in Scots identity. The way the story is recanted now focuses on the division of the clans between loyalty to the Stewart pretenders to the Scottish crown and the English rulers of the country. It overlooks the treacherous manoeuvres back and forth by most clans most of the time, it certainly glosses over the strong strand of allegiance to the stern Protestantism and ancient Catholic churches of Scotland. Whilst evidence suggests the plaids (tartans) of certain clans were forbidden and eventually forgotten and wearing kilts outlawed, although *trews* (more like trousers) were probably far more commonly worn, less credence is given to the prohibition of Catholicism.

Thus what we find today is part of a reconstructed identity that came with the Victorian fascination with the Scots romanticism of such writers as Sir Walter Scott and thus to a revival and regeneration of a physical identity of being Scottish. Whilst tartans were designed and clan allegiances reconstructed, enormous estates were being put together in the famous Highlands by foreign, mainly English, owners. The land was given over to sheep and so-called 'land clearances' removed the native peasantry and crofters from traditional lands. The once vast forests that had already been severely depleted were further stripped and more people removed. Some went to the British colonies, others went to the industrialising cities and others moved the margins of permissible survival. English

landowners made fortunes for a short time with the wool from vast numbers of sheep in every possible part of the country however for many of them the vast estates became more a place of leisure where they could hunt the magnificent red deer, grouse, capercaillie and golden eagles. With religious prohibition came also persecution of language, thus the dominant Gaelic of parts of the west coast and highlands and islands began to diminish.

Thus we leap forward to the late nineteenth century, Catholic emancipation, beginning of modern Scottish Nationalism and the beginning of tribalism. As a modern Scottish identity emerged, new interpretations of clan and religious affiliations also materialised that have produced the almost tribal nature of the contemporary Scots. It manifests itself in various allegiances. Scottish Nationalism is less aggressively nationalistic than many other political groups bearing the word. Much of their ideology is carried over from a strongly identifiable Scottish socialism. It was, in fact, a significant contributor to the formation of the British labour movement and Labour Party as it was. Thus it bears both aspirations of independence for Scotland and internationalism as an independent member of the European Union. However, the Scots themselves have emerged as a nation of separable identities; Lowlanders, Highlanders, Islanders, Arcadians (natives of the Orkney Islands), Gaelic speakers, Scots speakers, those with the highland brogue, low Scots, western Catholic, eastern Protestant. Football emphasises sectarian difference, thus in Glasgow Roman Catholics support Celtic and Protestants support Rangers. Ironically, Celtic and many of the club's followers are descendants of Irish immigrants who brought Scotland the modern form of Catholicism. In vain attempts to create and enforce affiliation that had never been there before, modern interpreters of being Scots and membership can fit almost anybody into one or another of the many clans, plus show them a sample of the one or more family tartans, plus print out the clan heraldic device and motto on their computer in minutes. Thus an American visitor with a distinctly Russian Jewish name who had a great grandmother born with the name Monroe will claim his place in his clan. But then the Scots are great adopters and more than a few patriots will claim at least two generations of the Macari family great Scots heroes. They are members of the soccer fraternity of Italian

ancestry, despite the coincidence of their name beginning with *Mac*.

A further irony in this search for identity is the estrangement of some of the descendants of the Highland clearances and others who escaped poverty and deprivation one and half to two centuries ago. In Canada and the USA there are communities of pre-modern Gaelic speakers, perhaps many more in Nova Scotia than in Scotland and along the coast near Cape Cod and in the Appalachian Mountains small enclaves of people who still use the language as the familiar tongue but American English for everybody else. These people are perhaps the truest of the Scots in as far as they can be one people. As for the tribalism within the Scottish nation, that is part of the search for identity that appears to give them the bricks with which to build the 'temple' of being a nation.

This is, one would say, a very pronouncedly unscientific introduction to the topic of tribalism. The basis of writing this is a polemic by a *Sunday Times* journalist who had strong feelings about the same. Why I have begun this way is because A.A. Gill and I share one thing. We have Scottish origins and live outside of 'our' country. It allows us the privilege of viewing the Scots in such light with impunity. Whilst there are no distinct studies to back up our view, it is one that is perfect clear to all who look at what is happening in contemporary Scotland. Whilst the view we both expound derides Scotland a little, probably neither of us thinks it is a bad thing. What I see as an anthropologist is the loss of the various ethnic origins of those who made the Scottish people being replaced by a nation composed of tribe-like identities, ones which emphasise difference and give a degree of belonging to distinct groups. Scotland is thus a nation of tribes within.

The world was resolutely set on a path of elimination of differences. We are at the stage of regret but also largely at the point of no turning back. Thus the University of Manchester, Department of Linguistics has predicted that 90% of the world's languages will be lost by 2050. Adoption of dominant languages is most frequently paired with espousal of a large part of the accompanying culture, possibly finding the people embracing the religion of their cultural colonisers. Christianity and Islam have been very successful in that respect, thus we find English and Arabic among the 10 or so world languages spoken by upward of 100 million people because

of the processes of invasion, colonisation, domination and religious conversion that have seen older cultures and beliefs superseded by the ones people know now. At the zenith of cultural colonisation the people were often subservient to a dogma, which may be religion or political control. The way in which a relatively small number of administrators and military presence compared to native populations kept an entity such as the British Empire together illustrates this more convincingly than most others. It is, however, not to say that French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese control was no less effective at particular points in time. However, the end product has been resistance to enduring foreign domination that lead to independence, often after lengthy resistance including bloody armed struggles. The aftermath of independence has also been a struggle for identity where the former conditions had been long since to disturbed or displaced by external influences. Perhaps Indonesia is a good example of all of this in one. The geography of the political state emphasises this. It comprises of an enormously diverse group of islands of different sizes. Ethnically the majority of people are similar to but not the same as each other whereby their languages and local cultures are vastly different. Indonesia has the largest single Islamic population in the world and they are most certainly the religious majority in the political state. However they are by no means the only religion, the recently independent East Timor was formerly a Portuguese colony before absorption into Indonesia after the former rulers left. They are largely Roman Catholic. There are large numbers of Buddhists and Hindus throughout the many islands, plus numerous native religions. Recently there has been an upsurge in the number of parts of Indonesia rebelling against control from Jakarta, Irian Jaya and Aceh have both been unsettled for several years and wish to achieve independence. Although independence from the Netherlands effectively came with the withdrawal of Japanese invaders toward the end of World War Two, the independent nation state of Indonesia owed much of its 'stability' to five decades of virtual dictatorship that ruled with an iron fist. Liberal and secularised Islam unified many of the people. Nonetheless the instinct toward distinct identity and liberation rather than democratic nations call independence has persisted. Again, it is the tribe within who wish

to stand up and be recognised who stand out in such situations.

Just how pure is this phenomenon 'the tribe'? Well, perhaps to begin with we might think about local warfare. Most certainly in the not too distant past and even to a limited extent today, one of the outcomes of local warfare is the capture of people from the opposing side who have been enslaved, allegedly cannibalised in some places and most certainly forced to marry captors. It has been said that child captives have been kept and raised by their captors and thus become one of them. That certainly undermines genetic arguments since where this has happened the gene pool contains anything but a 'pure blood'. Additionally, if we are to believe accounts of captives from entirely other ethnic groups, such as European women captured by plains tribes during the settlement of the USA being taken as wives, then the racial purity argument also loses more ground. Where slaves were taken in large numbers then sold as individuals rather than groups, tribal connections may remain as a folk memory thus enable an Alex Haley to write a bestselling novel like *'Roots'* and be able to claim direct traces back to his ancestor in Africa, but are quite a doubtful proposition on the whole. Haley had the great fortune or tracing his ancestor Kunta Kinte back to the Gambia through an advertisement of his sale in Annapolis in 1767. It is an exception rather than the rule.

Human migrations have been many and frequent over the millennia. We know how great empires such as the Romans, Mongols, Ottomans, Incas, etc, have conquered and ruled vast areas of entire continents, often moving people aside or in great numbers with them. Indeed, history tells how the Mongols extended their invasion well into Europe, thus much of modern Russia down to what is now Austria was linked by Mongol control to large parts of what is now the Chinese Pacific coast. To this day there is still a very small indigenous Islamic population in the east of Poland that is partly descended from the Mongols but over the centuries has become far more Slavonic in appearance and nature. In most parts of the world, until historically very recently there were almost as many nomadic people as sedentary. To one extent or another we have formed an idealised view of the tribe, which is not to say that it does not or should not exist. It also exists in some places and not others today, which does not always present a true picture. In Europe we have an excellent example through so-

called gipsy peoples. Although Romany peoples have been extensively made to become sedentary throughout Europe, many of them will still recognise their 'tribal' differences and speak of themselves as Romani or Sinti. Very few of them now speak their once common Romani language, Roma, and have often adapted to the dominant culture and language around them without becoming part of it. They also both see themselves as a distinct ethnic group and are recognised as that by the people they live among. Yet among themselves they are still able to discern families, clans and regional 'tribes' by using distinctions the majority of people cannot see. Enough of their 'tribal' identity is retained for them to remain what they want to be.

So what about the people we are more customarily concerned with? *Survival International* and such groups have invested a great deal of time and energy into campaigns and information about people worldwide whose 'traditional way of life' is threatened. One may agree in principle but what may appear a convincing campaign may be one that disregards the real wishes of the people for whom a campaign is waged. We might take the example of the Jarawa who live on the western side of two of the Andaman Islands who only recently come into closer and more regular contact with other people on the islands. The Indian government has had the intention of 'resettling' them. For some campaigners it has been interpreted as a euphemism that says that they are 'primitive', thus should be 'civilised'. At present it is difficult to know what they exactly want since very few non-Jarawa speak their language. It may be that despite the impression that they have shunned outside influences until today that they are better informed than has previously been assumed. Perhaps they feel they are ready for 'modernity'. It is for them to choose.

The Jarawa story is a strange paradox. People who appear to have shunned the rest of the world for millennia have found a number 'champions'. Those people use the media of WWW to defend the right of that people not to be resettled. Little anthropological and linguistic work has been done on them, so little is known about their world view. It is dubious how much evidence there is to support the argument that they want *Survival International* and such groups to defend them. I am quite sure that the organisations defending them are quite genuine and actually doing

precisely the right thing. My concern, however, is more whether or not the activists defending them have the express wishes or informed consent of the people they are speaking for. If, which I doubt, the Jarawa wish to leave their past behind and walk proudly into the present then it is their right to do so. However, should it be their choice to do so then the choice of how and why should be their own and the outcome should be a consensual one that meets their future needs leaving whatever they wish to carry of their identity into that future for them to choose. It is not, whatever either side may claim, in any sense deferential to their needs to decide for them.

What is often apparently altruism is, in fact, self-interest dressed up to look otherwise. There are often actions that are more determinist than acquiescent because they serve the interests of the people carrying out actions rather than those who should be in receipt of them, often with rather contrary justifications. One might, for example, take Darwinist views that see human society as constantly evolving. If we accept that then traditions are something we should be happy to discard and move away from rather than cling on to them as an important part of our heritage. Evolution theories show that all things change, whilst often slowly, they nevertheless either improve and thrive or degenerate and disappear. Thus the rationale of a Darwinist view is that some things are strong enough to survive, improve and progress, thus that which does not change is doomed to slow decline and extinction. In some respects it is a glib view and does not support human sentiments in its equation.

It would appear that the desire to have and hold strong identities survives most external influences. Where the old identities are lost or weak we have a proclivity for the creation of new 'tribes'. Thus when we look at the world we live in, despite all of its material attractions, it is still attractive to belong. It then matters little whether our tribe is Manchester United Supporters' Club or Yanomami as long as we have that solidarity in either traditional or modern world.

As I have repeatedly said, this is an unscientific work. Much of what I am saying here is without research and literature to support my arguments. Yet we are probably all aware of it around us. If it is the manifestation of modernity that gives us cohesion in our respective pieces of this world, then it equally serves to justify the preservation of older groups who wish to

continue as they have for many years undisturbed and unchanged more than they wish to be. A more recent example of pseudo-tribalism was when the calypso singer and actor Harry Belafonte tried to persuade his friend, Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, to speak out against a probable US attack on Iraq. Belafonte accused his friend of being a 'house slave' and 'a willing slave of his white master'. It would appear that Belafonte also expressed a view that having a member of the 'tribe' in a position of authority created a problem for African Americans. In the clear light of day this is an absurdity given that in 1976 when Alex Haley's *Roots* became an international best selling work of fiction, and subsequently the retracing of his origins became substantiated, one thing it did was remind African Americans of their diversity of origin. On the other hand, as with the opening argument about a 'melting pot' tribe, the Scots, it can naturally be considered a legitimate way of expressing and understanding identity. That, in itself, remains one of the strongest emotional reasons for people to wish to be members of a tribe.

We may conclude that tribalism is either an ideal or a reality depending on how we wish to be identified or identify others. What is indisputable is the right of people to assume that cohesion. It becomes an irrelevance as to whether or not there is an historical basis for claims to be a tribe. It is far more important that people who strongly feel that their identity is cohesive in such a way that it gives them legitimate reason for having a tribal identity. Thus when we do delve further into what genuinely makes tribalism we do not only need to use modern scientific method such as genetic and DNA measurement of the ethnic origins and authenticity but also have to take into account basic human rights principles that give us the right of identity. Conversely, ethically we should not strive to persuade those who choose to leave their culture and social order behind to join the rest of us in 'modernity'.

There is good example of this. The Old Testament of the Christian Bible (and probably Jewish teaching) refers to the 'tribes of Israel', yet the Jewish Diaspora has created contemporary people who shun that for a more national identity, hence American Jews, Russian Jews, Polish Jews or any other Jews. They share a religion, a basic cultural dogma within that belief,

they also share the right to migrate to Israel but then diversify within that religion along the lines of the countries to which their national identity belongs. They do not, at least overtly, seek to claim an identity that is in line with biblical tribalism. As such they have chosen a modern and national collective and individual identity. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that some kind of tribal revivalism could replace the present position they hold.

My unscientific argument thus relies more on the abstract notions of human and civil rights that offer us the protection of identity than the scientific argument I may use if using ethnographic studies. One does not exclude the other. What my argument does propose is that every tribe has the right to exist whether it fulfils the criteria of the most discerning anthropologist or not. As somebody who passionately defends ethnographic method as one of the best ways of truly examining any part of human society I do not feel that this is a contradiction. The two approaches need to coexist and complement each other. Therewith the tribe, however we or they may individually prefer to define it, will be given an equitable chance of survival within the modern state. So what is a tribe? A tribe has become whatever we want it to be because it allows us to revert to a far more coherent way of life where belonging and identifying to a homogeneous group with its own culture, belief and world view comes with a sense of belonging. It is less important that we are frustrated Scots seeking a unity that has never really existed or supporting a football club who do not win championships, perhaps even 'slave' to a trend in music and clothes because they suit us best, thus we must belong, than whether or not we conform to the traditional definition of a tribe. The imitated tribalism and the reversion back to that sense of belonging deny the modernist view of people as individualists who prefer the anonymity of unshared lives amongst the masses. The two choices coexist. Neither really dominates the other since they are so far apart. Yet the fact that people choose to identify themselves with each other and assimilate or create a culture of their own simply reinforces the right of those who have lived in older tribes to continue to exist. Until, that is, they choose to leave that life behind.

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ABSTRACT This essay raises the question of what a tribe is? It could be seen in the context of a contemporary situation of people who feel they belong together as an expression of shared identity rather than the traditional understanding of people with shared ancestry, culture, beliefs and history. Tribes are, using a modern interpretation, what people want them to be and consist of people who create and maintain a strong enough identity to justify their claim. The starting point is the creation of 'national' identity using the people of Scotland as good example. Scotland is divided by historical align-

ments, religion, language, east and west, Highland and Lowland and belonging to the tribe-like clans. In fact it is a nation whose present identity has been created over the last two centuries. Other groups suggested include football team supporters, music fans and people who follow particular clothing fashion styles. This essay thus sets out to examine the topic seriously although it is approached in an unashamedly unscientific manner. However, it attempts to also do that in a gently humorous manner that does not dismiss what traditionalists would prefer a tribe to be.

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