

## The World until Yesterday

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For most of the history of the Human race, people have been subsiding in small bands hunting and gathering. The advent of agriculture did not arrive until some 10'000 years ago, after that there were states, bureaucracies, scripts, technological advances, and thus the overwhelming majority of people do not lead lives for which they were biologically evolved. So Rousseau was right to some extent, there are people still living in the state of nature. But of course he was wrong on many counts, as he did not do any empirical research only indulging in wishful speculation, incidentally a most pleasant occupation with no demands. What interesting about (ab)original people is that they give a window, a rapidly diminishing one and soon to be closed altogether, to the distant past of humans living in a state of pristine culture. Not that they lack culture, far from it, but it is a culture distinct from civilization, hence one that does not grow indiscriminately profoundly changing living conditions. In particular there is no history, as opposed to myth, and what is, only stretches so far back as transmission and absorption of human memory allows. What can they teach us? Nothing about modern technology of course, nor anything of science, but they have practices and traditions, which are basically independent of technology and constitute very important aspects of human lives. As the author observes, they provide a lot of experiments conducted on how life should be lived, experiments which would be morally impermissible to undertake now. This of course sounds a little bit like an after-rationalization, after all the overriding concern for our interest is ultimately pure curiosity. Nevertheless the book is structured along the lines of asking what can we learn from traditional societies. Not everything which is pristine is not necessarily good, we all shy away from infanticide, the strangulation of the old, violence in general and lack of medical skills to deal with the curable diseases. Life in the past was often very brutal, and almost always short. The author refers to almost forty different tribes, many of them belonging to New Guinea, of which the author has prolonged and intimate knowledge. The book is one on anthropology, but Diamond is not really a professional anthropologist, what has brought him to the island is what have brought countless naturalists in the past, namely birds. New Guinea is remarkable in another aspect, it was the last white spot on the map that was discovered. Until the 1930's the inner part of the island was thought to be just inaccessible mountain ranges, and not until it was flown over by planes did one realize that there was instead a densely populated area of hitherto unsuspected and hence uncontacted people. Not nomadic hunters, but primitive agriculture supporting a much larger population than sustainable by hunting and gathering. Being based on personal experience, the examples taken from New Guinea are by far the most interesting. In fact the material is rich enough to have supported its own book.

First we are talking about small collections of people, meaning tribes, with most a few hundred people, jut few enough that everybody would personally know everybody else and have a personal relation to them. For small bands of people, such as groups of hunters, the

numbers could be even less. Now the interesting thing is that when we are dealing with bands and small tribes they are too small to allow intermarriage within their own circles, that would lead to interbreeding and genetic degeneration. Thus when it comes to tribes, they need to have some contact with other tribes, and even more so when we are dealing with bands of people. Thus the tendency is to marry beyond the immediate tribe, which almost always means that the bride moves to the tribe of male. Traditions that do not encourage such habits do not last for thousand of years. As we all know one has for a long time been aware of the incest taboo present in all human societies. In fact when hostile tribes meet each other the victors may kill off all men, but take the women as booty, and copulate and impregnate them. The enemies may not consider each other as full fledged human beings, but sexual instincts override this.

Land in a primitive society is divided into small territories. When residential populations are concerned, the territories may be well defended as there would be a reasonable population density. For nomadic it is different, effective defense is not feasible, however when two bands encounter each other conflict inevitably ensues. Thus in primitive societies there is the own tribe, which of course are thought of as friends in a hostile world. Neighboring tribes may serve as allies or enemies, and the designation may change. Strangers though could be either, but most likely they are enemies. If two strangers encounter each other, the situation becomes very tense. Most likely one of them will get killed, unless both flee the site. But of course even primitive societies engage in trade, which means negotiating with strangers. The great advance brought about by civilization is to greatly reduce hostilities between strangers. In a populous society most encounters are among strangers. Thus there need to develop rituals and habits to deal with them, and that of course makes up a large part of culture. In the modern world we encounter strangers all the time and think nothing of it. We do not expect them to kill us, and in fact it is very unlikely to be killed by a stranger, much more so by someone close of kin with whom you have frequent contacts. In a traditional society it may very well be the other way around. Thus when the untouched people of interior New Guinea for the first time encountered people of the outside world the experience was one of total horror. There are still people to be found who were children when this happened, and who hence have invaluable stories to convey. This living window to a truly pristine world of yesterday, because any contact influences and pollutes creating a Heisenberg dilemma of observation. This living window is about to be closed for ever as already noted.

Humans are social beings and cannot survive on their own. One may argue that people could actually do so, but then one forgets that what makes that possible are inventions, and often entire infrastructures, that society has created. But even tribes cannot survive on their own in the long run, contact with other tribes are required, for purposes of trade. And intermarriage may be seen as one instance of such trades. Primitive economies are not monetary ones, but based on barter. Often primitive societies do develop the equivalent of money, the first step being to use a common commodity, such a cows or pigs, to be the basic units, to which everything else is compared. Thus a wife may be the equivalent of so and so many pigs. Thus pigs may serve as currency, but pigs also have an intrinsic value as pigs, this automatically ensures that they have a material value and that the system of bartering does not degenerate. The next step is that something handier than pigs are

used, one may then think of cowries and such. Still they must have some intrinsic value, otherwise the system would break down. To use as money things of no intrinsic value, such as bills, and nowadays even more abstract entities, requires trust. Coins traditionally had intrinsic metal value, meaning that the metal could be used for other things, but entities whose value lies in the expectation of increasing value, such as tulips, may lead to speculation bubbles, and modern economy always totters very close to that. But those developments go much beyond the problems of primitive trading. Barter is complicated, and it is also connected with rituals, because not always can you pay tit for tat, so even in primitive barter economies there must be trust and postponed gratifications. Gifts require counter gifts within a certain amount of time. Used as we are to money economies, this appears hopelessly convoluted, but we forget that much of our dealings do not fit under the umbrella of strict monetary dealings, in fact that would somehow degrade them. Just think of the notion of prostitution which on one hand simplifies the exchange of sexual favors, but on the other hand demeans them, by making them impersonal and exchangeable. So when it comes to personal favors, we do not pay our friends, but we expect reciprocity within reasonable time. Those dealings are complicated and depend on subtle hints, but the very complexity of the transactions create bonds, which straightforward buying and selling dispense with.

One thing that primitive societies as well as advanced society often meet with is the issue of compensation when harm has been done. In advanced societies this often happens between strangers, who had had no prior relation and hence there will be no need to restore what never was. The impersonal judiciary system is ideal for handling such things, and it usually does it competently, nipping in the bud cycles of revenge, which is often such a predominant feature of societies in which the law is to a large extent in private hands. Some vestiges of this can be seen in the American system which alone among Western democracies retain barbaric features in their judicial practices, such as capital punishment. Close relations to victims are often invited to witness executions in order to get satisfaction and hence supposedly achieve some closure. Thus the very act of the crime creates a relation of sorts which is seen as not possible to let alone. Now, the real difficulty is to handle matters when relations have to be resumed and hostilities aborted or at least held in severe check. Typical examples are couples divorcing with children. Here the system does not work as well as it is hard to formally codify procedures. Furthermore such problems are given low priority and hence proceedings tend to stretch out for years and become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Here, according to the author, we may learn a lot from primitive, or as the author prefers to call them, traditional societies.

But one thing we have nothing to learn concerns warfare. In absolute numbers the victims involved in acts of warfare are small, and the engagements would never qualify as battles but would be dismissed as mere skirmishes. This is due of course to small population numbers, there is no modern specialization, no caste of soldiers, no advanced weapons other than axes, spears and bows and arrows, which are not seen as weapons as much as everyday implements in hunting. Thus war can almost be seen as idyllic, and wars have been witnessed by early anthropologists replete with proper documentation. The very scale of the engagement raises some moral issues as to the passivity of the outsiders,

do they not have an obligation to interfere with the hostilities? Private citizens have no such moral expectations when it comes to hostilities between modern states, they are just too powerless. The moral issue is further sharpened by the act that anthropologists are active observers, the very act of witnessing activities is seen as exciting and they are just very concerned about not interfering, and thus sully the authenticity, in particular involving a deep reluctance to discourage. The phenomenon is usually referred to as 'voyeurism' and which plagues the practice of anthropology as a discipline. To put the question starkly, what is the difference between murder and war? In modern society where violence becomes the prerogative of the state, the distinction becomes more formal and hence easier to formulate, but in traditional societies the distinction becomes more fluid and resistant to precise demarcation. Murder is a crime, while war is not<sup>1</sup>. To witness a murder without interfering, when doing so would not endanger your life, tends to be tantamount to complicity. Anyway, when entire tribes engage in hostilities against each other as tribes, the most appropriate designation is war, even if it will involve raids and ambushes, but that is also part of modern wars. Traditional wars may be seen as dolls play, but it involves killings. In fact people dying from wars are statistically much higher than in modern society, and it is not restrained to combatants, but involve women and children as part of massacres<sup>2</sup>. Thus the freedom from debilitating warfare, be it of low intensity if endemic, is one of the blessings of modern civilization, and hardly anything to hanker back to. The romantic idea of native populations living in peace and harmony is a pure phantasy. In fact relative protection from violence constitutes one of the reasons often cited for traditional people giving up their lifestyles and adopting modern mores.

Humans are not well adapted to giving birth. The head of the infant being too big for the canal of delivery. Hence giving birth is a hazard not seldom resulting in the death of the mother, even into the early 20th century in civilized societies. In some traditional societies women get assisted at birth, at others they are left to their own devices, sinking or swimming. Traditionally infants are killed for unsentimental reasons, especially in nomadic societies where resources are limited and each added mouth not only adds a burden as to feeding but literally to be carried around. Recall that according to Malthus, every couple can on the average only raise two children to become childbearing, if populations should be in balance. In good years, as with animals, more children can be raised, in bad, fewer. Hunter and gatherers tend to give birth at relatively long intervals, whether this is due to conscious birth-control or side-effects of long nursing periods is not clear. Nevertheless a certain pattern of child rearing among traditional societies can be discerned, and that differ markedly from the traditional one of modern societies. For one thing children are treated indulgently, their needs are immediately taken care of. When they cry they get the attention of adults right away, none of those modern ideas of toughen the child, they suckle whenever they feel the need for it, it is not done on a schedule or when it is convenient

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<sup>1</sup> The attempts to in recent years to make war come under the rubric of crime have not been very successful especially not from a judicial point of view, for obvious reasons, because right is inevitably a question of might between sovereign states. Even when this is not the overriding issue such as with the case of the Geneva conventions, which could fall under universal jurisdiction and thus be the subject of persecution, there are problems of implementation.

<sup>2</sup> The widespread massacres of Rwanda were traditional massacres writ large.

for the mother. Furthermore nursing is extended for years, much longer than is done now. Apart from reasons of convenience, there is no prepared baby-food, it prolongs the physical bond between child and mother, which in modern society is looked askance at. In fact the mother is always available, carrying the child around on her body, often in an upright position looking forwards, thus looking at what the mother is looking at. In fact children are much more part of the daily routines of adult life, to which they need to adapt. Some traditional societies go so far that they allow the children complete freedom in what they do, loath to interfere even when it threatens the health and well-being of the offspring. We would on the other hand be loath to let the child play close to an open fire or with sharp knives. The lack of discipline involved in child rearing is remarkable. This is on one hand rather unremarkable, after all there are no theories of child rearing so what has evolved is a process in which child rearing is more or less automatic. For one thing there is no formal schooling, children are allowed to play, and their play is inevitably inspired by adult occupations, what else could inspire them? Their play tends also to be much more creative than that of modern children. They are not given any manufactured toys but have to do with what they have and can make themselves. Thus their imagination is much more involved, and they tend to use all their senses and not just their mental capacities. Also children play with other children of different ages, such interactions are inevitable due to the small populations involved. This greatly enhances learning from each other. In short childhoods are perfect for preparing children for their lives as adults, lives which in traditional societies are rather demanding in spite of a lack of sophisticated and complicated technology, but rather because of primitive technologies. To be a hunter requires a lot of skills which take a long time to learn. The work of a traditional hunter in securing a prey is far more intellectually and physically challenging than the average job a modern worker is expected to perform. Additionally it is far more intimately related to the basic needs of an individual and his family and thus more satisfying.

Now one may easily conclude that it is in our attitudes to children we have the most to learn from our traditional cousins. Where we may recoil from it as in the case of infanticide, we may note that it appears brutal, but in what moral sense does it really differ from abortion? Abortion is done at the convenience of the mother, and more generally the immediate family while in a nomadic society it is not just a matter of convenience but of life and death. And it does involve an artificial cessation of a developing life, but the process is so abstract that one is not reminded of what is really going on. Still it is an emotionally charged thing, and few would-be-mothers would keep the aborted fetus in a jar, as they may do with gall-stones or extracted wisdom teeth. An aborted fetus is more akin to that of a tumor. It is in the interest of society that abortion is de-dramatized. This issue having been disposed of, we may ask more systematically what features of traditional child rearing are worth adopting? When it comes to small children it is rather easy, a more indulgent attitude to the child is rather easy to achieve, rejecting ideas of disciplining and training children, which anyway is counterintuitive. In particular there is never any physical punishment involved, a step modern societies only recently have distanced themselves from<sup>3</sup>. Then there is the problem of working mothers. Mothers in traditional societies are also working in the sense of not being as readily accessible to

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<sup>3</sup> Corporeal punishment of children became illegal in Sweden, much to the amusement of the outside

the needs of the child, but then there are grandmothers and other adults to step in. In a traditional society the child is never alone, always surrounded by other children and adults. In fact the same fixation on parents which we have in modern societies is not the case, children, for one thing are always welcome to be fed by any family. As an aside one may remark that this makes the need to look for partners outside the tribe so much more important, in view of the incest tabu. But there is no formal schooling in traditional societies as there is no need for it, children learn what they need to learn automatically just as they learn to walk and talk. This is hardly feasible in a modern society. Now modern pedagogy stresses the independence of the child at school, that it should be free to develop its own talents and creativity should be encouraged, preferably without any adult interference. This paradisiacal state of things is indeed the case in traditional societies for the simple reason that they have no schools at all. If something similar should be implemented in modern society the radical and logical thing would simply be to abolish schools. Once you have schools the motivating idea is discipline and interference, if not present you simply get the worst of both worlds, something irrational behavior usually present you with. Some children learn to read by themselves before they start school, just in the same way children in traditional societies pick up adult skills, but it is not clear whether all children would eventually do so without explicit instruction. Of course one cannot rule out incidences of instructive explanations in traditional society, but those do of course occur spontaneously when the specific need arises, to learn to read is a longer process. Modern life, with its many undeniable advantages, requires certain sacrifices, one of them being a disciplined childhood. But certain things characteristic of traditional societies, such as mixed age-groups, could be to some extent emulated. Even in modern societies, due to small population bases, rural schools tend to mix ages, but only a minority of children in the western world benefit from that, as rural populations tend to be marginal.

The treatment of the elderly is a growing problem in modern life. People live longer due to modern medicine. What it does not mean is that people do not age as quickly as they did in the past, only that when aged they can be kept alive longer as threats to life, many of them acute, can be treated, thus postponing the inevitable. Even in antiquity people could get to be very old, and also very old people occur in traditional societies. On the other hand due to treatable diseases, wars and accidents, many people are culled before they reach fifty, so being past that age you are considered old, because there are so relatively few of you, and thus your signs of natural biological age is so much more noteworthy. But in demanding societies, old people do become to be burdens, and like unwelcome children, a threat to the tribe as a whole, in particular when it is nomadic and only consisting of a band. Thus killing your older relatives becomes as much of a necessity as killing infants. People are simply forced to be unsentimental. Modern medicine has replaced infanticide with abortion, which is a far more palatable procedure, but there is nothing equivalent when it comes to old age. Abortion involves healthy fetuses with a potential future, while in old age a larger and larger part of the old are seriously sick and demented, with no future and only being a burden to themselves as well as to others. The others can be saved through institutionalizing the inept, and many children in the West

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world in the early 70's, since then other western countries have followed suit. One may remind the reader that corporeal punishment of adults has been illegal for a long time.

having disposed of their elderly parents, and their consciences mollified by being satisfied that material needs are satisfied, feel that they can then safely forget about them. An attitude puzzling to traditional people (would killing not have been more honest?) So what can we learn?

Basically the conveniences of institutions relieve children from taking care of their parents, in fact the physical separation of parents and children start very early, in fact at the end of childhood. Families tend to be nuclear not extended, making the elderly in many ways useless. In non-western countries, in which there is no well-fare system, the extended family still remains the natural unit and the one that provides security in a hostile world. It incidentally also means that the needs and ambitions of the individual is subservient to the needs and ambitions of the extended family. This is still noticeable in many non-western cultures, and makes for a different attitude towards life. Also in many traditional societies older people having survived the vicissitudes of modern life are for that very reason invaluable being in possession of unique experience. Some of that experience which traditionally was relayed orally has in recent centuries been documented by writing, making the corresponding reservoirs of knowledge superfluous. The author notes that the rapidly changing technology makes old experience to a larger extent obsolete, further decreasing the value of being old<sup>4</sup>. Hence the current emphasis on youth in modern Western culture. To break such an attitude is not easy, on the other hand, politicians are usually old, and with the abolishing of mandatory retirement in the academic world in the States, some inroads have been made to enhance the value of the aged, but of course this is marginal in most cases old age makes you less valuable as an employee.

The author as an evolutionary biologist and of a rational temperament is puzzled by religion, so obviously irrational and without any factual basis. On the other hand being rational and an evolutionist he is challenged to find an evolutionary explanation for the phenomenon. What strikes non-religious people about religion is its irrationality and elements of superstition. The tendency to look for supernatural causes for everyday phenomena. However, this is part and parcel of the same attitude and ambition that has brought us science. In that sense religion and science can be said to have grown out of the same soil. Both in science and religion you look for what is not immediately apparent. To explain material phenomena in terms of atoms is clearly a case of finding supernatural causes, and was actually thought so by many scientists until the early 20th century. Science differs from religion in making curiosity disciplined, by making the reasoning caused by it transparent, allowing it to be criticized and hence amenable to modification. Religion works by authority, often blind, and if not initially blind, then blinded. Science by democracy in its original sense, as instigated by the Greek. But religion also satisfies deep psychological needs that mere curiosity can never satisfy. The author brings up the case of meaning and purpose, and how we all look for it, but that science can never provide it, except possibly by the efforts to do so. The picture science paints of the world gives us little comfort, but the act of painting it may nevertheless do so. Those who are not actively pursuing science will not get any emotional satisfaction from it, and the material benefits, so cherished by the public at large, and as a consequence by the politicians who court them, will in

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<sup>4</sup> However, there is still a difference between personally conveyed knowledge and decodified, as in the difference between a teacher and that of a text-book.

the end not bring the ultimate. But from an evolutionary perspective religion has had beneficial aspects as it has provided comfort and consolation and served as an antidote to fear, and the faith in an ultimately beneficial being has provided meaning and security. However, such a description of religion is heavily biased towards the monotheistic versions, which in the last 2000 years have been very successful as far as proselytes and influence is concerned<sup>5</sup>. Hinduism is more subtle, superficially polytheistic, it does entail deeper and more universal principles. Buddhism can be thought of having gone even further than monotheism by disposing of the deity itself. But what about Indo-European religions, such that of the Greeks, more or less taken wholesale by the Romans and showing striking analogies with Norse mythology, maybe because of sharing common roots. As to the more traditional religions, looked upon with askance by believing Christians and Muslims, based on spirits, one may admit that they have little in common with the dominating world religions. There are no holy scripts and hence no theology, and indeed without this structures they do appear rather primitive, and one may wonder what comfort they can provide, except the intellectual one of providing meaning through spurious causative explanations. Indeed, much of modern quotidian life is also dominated by more or less *ad hoc* explanations, using charms and contrived connections between disparate events. When it comes to personal health, where there is little hard information and an abundance of wishful thinking, we have a very fertile soil for superstition. Just as we may pride ourselves to be free of instincts like animals, yet being in fact ruled by instincts just as much, we may believe that we have transcended the way of life of primitive societies, but nevertheless being in the same way ruled by similar superstitions, because superstition always fills the void created by lack of knowledge, and there is indeed still much that we do not know, yet we are forced to make decisions. And modern man knows very little, and the little he believes he knows he seldom knows firsthand.

Are people smarter now than in the past? Most likely not in principle, modern man having evolved very little in the past 50'000 years or so. One must make a distinction between individual intelligence and knowledge and collective. As to knowledge there is a huge difference between the two, as to intelligence there is much less so, although it may be a bit hard to make a distinction between knowledge and intelligence when it comes to practical consequences. Language is a case in point, all languages are supposed to be equally powerful when it comes to expression, thus languages which are used by individuals to merge with a collective, reflect individual intelligence and capacity. A language may contain a huge number of words, but the dictionaries most people avail themselves of daily are surprisingly limited. This brings us to the issue of bilingualism and even multilingualism. In the past languages were not as widespread as nowadays with more mobile populations and mass media, and the historical fact of recurrent conquests and suppression creating larger and large entities of monoglottism due to more and more powerful bureaucracies which thrive on unified means of communication. As a consequence traditional people were forced to know a fair amount of languages, admittedly many were just dialectical variations of each other, and in real life, as opposed to bureaucratic, one may not always

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<sup>5</sup> Judaism does not recognize converts, or at least they play a most modest role, unlike the case of Christianity and Islam, which thrives on it. On the other hand Judaism can be said to have been the basis for both Christianity and Islam.



be able to draw clear lines of demarcations between different languages, typically dialects blend into each other, making opposite ends on a string, mutually unintelligible. Now Americans are notoriously monoglots, there being little need except that of diversion to acquire another language. In fact there has been claims to the effect that bilingualism is bad, learning two languages at the same time interferes with the process and you end up knowing two languages sub-optimally, instead of having full linguistic command of a single one. In reality of course your vocabularies would be smaller in each language than in the single language, but combined they are much bigger. One may wonder why you could not match that number in a single language, but the natural explanation would be that those additional words would seldom be used and there would hence be little incentive in keeping them. While when speaking several languages you will have many more words often used. The author claims that multi-lingual people are less prone to develop dementia, because their brains are more flexible and more easily attuned to have sudden change of ground rules. Also that in contrast to other forms of supposed brain practice such as sudokos, you are constantly using it. I must say that I remain very skeptical. Then one may wonder what is really meant by multilingualism. It is one thing to acquire a smattering of many languages, another thing to really breathe them, to not only occasionally use them for small talk, but actually to think in them, meaning to carry on interior monologues. In fact true bilinguality is very unusual, and it may only be acquired in childhood during normal and pressing circumstances, being absolutely essential for communication. Also with each language you truly acquire comes an alternative personality. How many personalities can an individual really have? Nevertheless it is a habit we may do well to emulate, but once again in modern societies, such as American, there really is no compelling reason for being bilingual, to say nothing about multilingual. For non-English speakers it is different, but do those in continental Europe really end up being less demented in old age? There should be plenty of cases, and the statistics should be available with no need to set up special studies.

With the loss of traditional societies comes the loss of languages, many of them not documented, let alone properly so. Languages once lost can never really be revived, pace the case of Hebrew, which however was never abandoned but used in religious rituals, because not everything can be codified, just as it is not enough to have the DNA to revive extinct species. One may see this as a big tragedy, on the other hand it is just one aspect of so many which are rendered obsolete by modern technology.

Finally, traditional people are healthier than modern people, in spite of having shorter life spans, often dramatically so. The reason is that their life styles are more attuned to those for which humans have evolved, and the high death rates are due to accidents and contagious diseases. When it comes to chronic non-communicable ones they appear surprisingly free, such as coronary diseases and cancers, so when exceptional individuals have escaped the vicissitudes of traditional life they are in good shape when old age settles in. But traditional societies meeting modern mores experience dramatic declines in health, especially when it comes to coronary health and type two diabetes. In fact in some recently modernized societies the incidence of acquired diabetes and obesity is strikingly high. There are speculations to the effect that features which were very adaptable to life styles with little salt or food available, turn out to be at a disadvantage when conditions are

changed. In a salt poor environment excreting salt slowly is good, but disastrous in a salt rich one. So what can we learn? More traditional diets to be promoted. On the other hand diet is a question of habits, and those are very hard to change when ingrained. And even if you never touch a salt shaker, as the author never does, it only marginally reduces your intake, because salt is very much built into the system.

And this is the end of the story, because after all our attitude towards traditional societies and their lifestyles is bound to be mixed, and as usual features are often intertwined with each other and it is hard to disentangle the good from the bad.

But as was noted initially, in spite of the commendably instructive ambition of the book, the most engaging parts of it relate to the margins, namely three personal case stories, ostensibly supposed to illustrate the practice of what the author terms creative paranoia, namely to be overly careful when it comes to low intensive but persistent dangers, such as never sleeping close to an old tree which may fall down on you. The stories conveyed are not engaging for their putative messages, but for the tangible slices of real life they convey. Be it sleeping in a tent with a madman hovering around, or being nearly drowned during a boating accident (he should have known better than to trust his life to such careless sailors on such a lack of seaworthiness in a canoe) or an exciting birding expedition in a deserted part of New Guinea, in the end coming to no harm. In consequentia as they may be, I find them among the most charming passages in the book. The reason may be obvious.

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