

difficult problems.

In a letter from 1639, a Prague alchemist writes to Kircher, hoping that he might decipher an indecipherable code, quite possibly a famous piece of cryptography known today as the Voynich Manuscript that may have been sent to Kircher by another Czech scholar, Johannes Marcus Marci, in 1666. Elsewhere in the correspondence, the flamboyant, erudite and sexually ambiguous Catholic convert, Queen Christina of Sweden, thanks Kircher for having dedicated to her, in the year after her abdication, his *Ecstatic Voyage* (1656), an imaginary bit of space travel done by a fictional Kircher and an angel. A Criollo priest writes from Puebla that he is dreaming of Kircher's machines after seeing his books and sends his favorite author a bit of chocolate. A German missionary shares his observations of the Brazilian heavens and longs for Rome. Kircher's Dutch publisher checks in regarding progress on the latest projects and sends a handsome, multibook contract. Letters by leading scholars exude polite but learned skepticism at Kircher's more exuberant conclusions, such as his persistent advocacy of the miraculous sympathetic healing properties of a bit of Jesuit missionary medicine from South Asia known as the snakestone—a calcified substance that reputedly attached itself to wounds to suck out poisons. A young Leibniz wrote fan letters and then decided that Kircher was pretty much wrong about everything; others never ceased to believe that Kircher might be right. Legions of readers eagerly awaited his next publication, sharing information and secrets in the hope of being cited by one of the seventeenth-century's most famous authors.

It is relatively easy to see only absurdity in Kircher's ambition. The young German scholar Andreas Müller, who allegedly invented some hieroglyphic writing for Kircher to "translate" late in his career, did indeed expose Kircher's misplaced confidence in his ability to answer definitively some of the hardest questions of his time. (Jean-François Champollion's analysis of the Rosetta Stone did not provide a true linguistic analysis of Egyptian hieroglyphics until 1822, though scholars long understood that more symbolic readings such as Kircher's were likely to be acts of wishful thinking.) Glassie doesn't flinch from explaining how Kircher was deluded in his quest for a grand unified theory of absolutely everything. Yet Glassie also captures some of the intoxicating possibilities of a moment in which a single—and singular—mind stood at the center of a global Catholic information network, embraced the internationalism of Baroque Rome, and at-

tempted to make sense of virtually every imaginable domain of knowledge then under discussion. Did you want to know the origins of the Nile or the location of Atlantis? Father Kircher's maps were there to guide you. Did you aspire to learn the Pater Noster and Ave Maria in Sanskrit? Read his book on China. Were you wondering exactly how high the Tower of Babel reached or the cubic footage of Noah's Ark? The books were just about to appear. Would you like to write in cipher? Stop by the Roman College museum and ask Father Kircher for a lesson or two.

Perhaps Kircher has appealed to writers and readers through the ages because he tried so hard to do it all and show just a bit of everything in the process. For some, Glassie included, there is something crazy admirable about seeing a writer jump off an intellectual precipice without a parachute. And there is the sheer audacity and folly of that towering stack of beautifully illustrated and almost unreadable tomes written by a man who once confessed to his most trusted disciple that he dreamed of being pope. If he were around today, he would probably claim to have written Wikipedia single-handedly. In the cabinet of human curiosities, Kircher is one of the ultimate curios—a term I prefer to "eccentric," because the ideas that Kircher sometimes stretched to their limits were the basic ingredients of intellectual life during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Much like P.T. Barnum, Kircher was an ingenious producer of spectacles responsive to the appetites of his society, making him an interesting mirror to hold up to the age commonly

described as the scientific revolution. Newton would become the eighteenth century's celebrity man of science, but Kircher—as much as Galileo or Descartes—was that person in Newton's youth, which is why Sor Juana coined a verb, *kircherize*, to acknowledge her debt to her muse.

Someday soon, I will consult the Voynich Manuscript in Yale's Beinecke Library to see if Father Kircher can assist me in cracking the ultimate code. I will translate it into demotic Egyptian, place it inside a language box, project it through my magic lantern, refract it in catoptric theater, set it to music, and announce the results in an echo chamber to multiply their potential effects. My great discovery will be secured by a secret manuscript acquired from a retired Kurdish herdsman at the local swap meet, one that only I can read. I will promise to publish a graphic novel about my own great adventure (though I never will, of course, to honor the ghosts of Kircher's many well-advertised projects that never quite became books, not to mention a few of my own). One day, a novelist will write about me because of what I may or may not have known. Historians will puzzle over my own perdurance (I did not make up this word, but possibly Kircher did—or should have, since he invented so many neologisms). In the interim, however, readers unfamiliar with one seventeenth-century Jesuit's excellent adventure should enjoy Glassie's sympathetic and pleasurable account of a world we have lost in the daylight, but still harbor in the unexpected recesses of our nocturnal imaginations. ■

Hunter-Blatherer

by STEPHEN WERTHEIM

On the vast time scale of human evolution, it was just this morning that Jared Diamond was a trained physiologist writing calculation-laden papers on sodium transport in the gallbladder. That was 1962, to be precise; but in the lives of individuals and even societies, a half-century can make all the difference. Setting his sights well beyond gallbladderata, Diamond, who teaches geography at UCLA, has become that rare author read by academics in various disciplines and huge popular audiences. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller from 1997, sought to explain noth-

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The World Until Yesterday

What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?

By Jared Diamond.

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ing less than Western global predominance over 13,000 years of history, arguing forcefully for the influence of geography on the development of human societies. What *Guns* did for bio-geography, Diamond's new book, *The World Until Yesterday*, attempts for socio-cultural anthropology. One anthropologist who got hold of an advance copy was so transfixed by the book that he scurried to his blog and proclaimed: "He is the new Margaret Mead. *The new Margaret Mead, people.*"

Should we believe the hype? *The World Until Yesterday* offers a grand tour of “traditional societies,” as it terms the various hunter-gatherer, herding and farming communities into which humans organized themselves for most of their existence, before large state structures took over the world. Though Diamond has long claimed to challenge the ethnocentrism of his fellow Americans, the new book is his most sustained effort to see radically different societies from the inside, as their members do. Drawing together scores of anthropological findings, as well as insights from his own trips to New Guinea, he plumbs dozens of nonstate societies to discern the function of nine common social practices, from conflict

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resolution to child rearing to religious ritual. He describes two tribal alliances waging the ferocious Dani War in New Guinea, killing their enemy without compunction despite their common language and culture. We meet a !Kung band whose every member joins in the constant bickering between husband and wife: picture the borough of Queens composed entirely of Costanzas, but with spears, on the Kalahari. Not least, we see Diamond clinging for life to a capsized canoe, only to discover after his rescue how a New Guinean knew to spot and avoid the boat company’s cocky crew.

Diamond intends his book to be more than the sum of its titillating anecdotes. He wants to convey the wondrous cultural diversity of the world until yesterday—and the narrowness of the world today. What’s strange about our world is not just that, say, parents and their young children sleep in separate rooms, whereas out of ninety small-scale societies not one put a wall between mother and infant. (“Current Western practice,” Diamond concludes, “is a recent invention responsible for the struggles at putting kids to bed that torment modern Western parents.”) It’s also that the differences separating modern societies from each other look minuscule compared with those separating their predecessors. The Aché in Paraguay practice infanticide and the Tallensi in Ghana hit their kids, but when an anthropologist in the Amazon wished to spank his daughter, the Pirahãs would not allow it. Treatment of the elderly likewise runs the gamut: old people rule many herd-

ing societies as tyrannical “gerontocracies,” but elsewhere they face abandonment, even strangulation, once their productive years elapse. Though Diamond isn’t counseling us to kill our elderly or anoint them as oligarchs, he does suggest that our sense of human possibility has been dulled by the relative uniformity of the modern world. Our psychologists, he notes, “base most of their generalizations about human nature on studies of our own narrow and atypical slice of human diversity.”

Diamond even implies, faintly, that humans may be best suited to life in traditional societies. “The world of yesterday shaped our genes, culture, and behavior for most of the history of behaviorally modern *Homo sapiens*,” he writes. The corollary is that we aren’t as well suited to modern life. Diabetes threatens us now, Diamond postulates, because natural selection favored genes that store sugar in the body, girding against long swings in the availability of food. Diamond seems

especially impressed by the psychology of tribal peoples, though he makes no effort to square their seeming composure with their affinity for routine infanticide, ruthless killing and other practices he finds abhorrent. Hunters like the !Kung won’t seek out risks to prove their courage; prudence does not seem cowardly or unmanly to them. Diamond is struck by the emotional security of children, who appear never to undergo adolescent identity crises. At age 14, he remarks, a New Guinean girl was “better qualified to be a parent than I had been when I became a father at age 49.”

By holding up primitive peoples to make ordinary features of Western society seem strange, Diamond is not far from Mead. Nor does Diamond’s comparative method exhaust his kinship with an older generation of American anthropologists. For example, he invokes the opposition of “traditional” and “modern” with a quaint disregard for the many reasons that anthropologists have since criticized it, and despite the fact that the “world until yesterday” included massive states, like China, that upend his definition of the traditional. He seems blissfully unburdened by anthropology’s role in furthering colonialism, which has been a source of endless soul-searching among anthropologists since the 1970s. After *Guns, Germs, and Steel* was rightly criticized for marginalizing imperialism as a factor in the West’s rise to world power, mightn’t Diamond have felt obliged to be critically aware of the values and agendas that guided

the tradition in which he writes? The only murmur of such awareness comes in his repeated denial of any intent to romanticize traditional societies.

To dwell on Diamond’s recapitulation of old sins would, however, miss his most distinctive contribution. Each section’s journey through yesterday’s world arrives at a particular destination: the practices he wants twenty-first-century Westerners to “selectively adopt” to their own circumstances. Traditional societies, Diamond writes, constitute thousands of “natural experiments in organizing human lives.” Here Diamond proves himself to be decidedly of his neoliberal moment. Whereas Mead tended to comprehend culture as a totality, Diamond sees so many chemicals mixed together; isolate the elements and we can mix them into our own “repertoire.” Thus he takes several millenniums’ worth of attempts at maintaining a healthy way of life and boils them down to the following recommendations: exercise regularly, eat slowly, and cut back on salt and sugar. A discussion of the world’s dwindling linguistic stock culminates with the suggestion to learn a language besides English. Infants and toddlers are, among other things, to be nursed on demand and transported vertically; in a rebuke to helicopter moms and dads, Diamond says that children should be given the freedom to explore (“appropriately monitored!” he adds, despite having just produced evidence of societies that let kids play with sharp knives).

Are propositions this tepid all that the abundance of human experience has to teach us? Somehow Diamond’s experiences in New Guinea and his scouring of anthropological literature landed him exactly where substantial numbers of Americans were already heading, right down to the slow-food movement. “Traditional societies tell their own stories and yield their own conclusions,” Diamond says, but his book blatantly filters those stories for conclusions compatible with the values and structures of his own society. The warring impulses in Diamond’s mind make for jarring reading. Each chapter opens up our imaginative horizons only to shrink them to a sliver. Consider his argument against mandatory retirement for the elderly. Old people in certain traditional societies play greater roles in them and thus are fulfilled in ways their Western counterparts are not, or so Diamond thinks. Why shouldn’t Europeans let their elderly keep working and Americans employ their own in more important jobs? All this is sensible, but there’s something heedless about the way Diamond derives a right to engage in wage labor till

death from the record of primitive peoples who knew neither capitalism nor ages now considered old. The same history could elicit so many other conclusions, such as no longer yoking retirement to the end of the life cycle. In passing over all but the most banal lessons, Diamond narrows the scope of human possibility where he might have widened it.

Despite his impulse to understand primitive peoples on their own terms, Diamond treats them as so many utensils on a Swiss Army knife: their purpose is to help us realize the values and execute the goals we have already set for ourselves, not to call them into question. Small wonder that we meet dozens of tribes but get to know none of them well—perhaps partly because Diamond, in decades of visits to New Guinea, went for no more than five months at a time, usually to watch birds. And because he mines them for prescriptions scarcely different from those many Americans have generated for reasons of their own, Diamond fails to establish the significance of primitive peoples even for instrumental purposes. He unwittingly reveals this at the end of two chapters that talk up the ways that small-scale societies emphasize quotidian dangers, just to reiterate the familiar point that Americans have more to fear from cars, alcohol and smoking than from terrorism. “Whether traditional peoples make similar misestimates of their lives’ dangers remains to be studied,” Diamond writes, sliding in an admission that he doesn’t know whether there really is any difference between “traditional” and “modern” perceptions of danger. Here as elsewhere, Diamond turns the scientific method on its head. Predetermined judgments are funneled through the tribes, and thereby stamped with the imprimatur of science.

An unreliable anthropologist of traditional societies, Diamond is a no less dubious diagnostician of the contemporary Western world. The jacket copy of his new book bills it as Diamond’s “most urgent.” Whereas present-day applications occupied the distant background of *Guns, Germs, and Steel and Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail and Succeed* (2004), they are the *raison d’être* of *The World Until Yesterday*. Delivered in the form of concrete prescriptions, they magnify the inadequacy of Diamond’s piecemeal conception of culture and society. He sings the praises of “constant skin-to-skin contact between the infant and its care-giver,” including breastfeeding “on demand,” but he’s silent on how most families could possibly approach this standard without first having six-figure

personal incomes, workplaces welcoming to babies, and lactation lounges lining the streets. Not only is Diamond unable to imagine collective answers to problems; but the individual to whom he always speaks is a stylized, undifferentiated Westerner who had better be upper-middle-class (at least) in order to implement most of Diamond’s advice. His section about diabetes and hypertension introduces us to the Wanigela people of New Guinea and the Yanomamo Indians of Brazil, but in proposing solutions for his own society, he finds no reason to mention the hugely increased prevalence of these diseases among African-Americans. In short, Diamond is a terrible anthropologist of us.

His political insights are just as shallow. Diamond seems determined to use his status as a celebrated public intellectual to hazard only the most politically anodyne thoughts. *Guns, Germs, and Steel* attacked the notion that racial superiority explained Western global pre-eminence, a view taken seriously by almost no one who’s taken seriously. A *New York Times* op-ed by Diamond published in 2009 hailed multinational corporations as saviors of the environment, mostly because he found three of them that were wrecking the earth less than they used to. In his new book, Diamond brushes aside anarchism as impractical, but replaces it with no program of his own. He doesn’t even offer a general critique of modern society that would unify his laundry list of proposals. Instead, *The World Until Yesterday* largely amounts to a self-help book, as satisfied with the status quo as that genre requires. Take Diamond’s treatment of noncommunicable diseases. After noting that the food industry has impeded Western governments’ efforts to reduce their citizens’ intake of salt, Diamond asks: “Are we citizens of industrial nations thus helpless pawns in the hands of food manufacturers?” Characteristically can-do, Diamond answers no: “you can eat a healthy diet high in fresh foods and low in processed foods.” Apparently, our only recourse against corporations that subvert the public welfare is to act individually as consumers (if we have the means) and hope everyone else joins in.

When Diamond comes closest to avowing a politics, it is on behalf of a revealing cause: arresting the diminution of the world’s linguistic stock. Only here does Diamond express a desire for government action to protect some of the indigenous cultures featured in the book. For an instant, Diamond’s deadly scientific prose gives way to deadly moralistic flourishes. These languages produce literatures that, once lost, “represent losses to humanity,”

he intones. What has finally riled Diamond are dying languages, not dying people—the danger that languages might go “extinct,” like the rare species of birds that brought him to New Guinea in the first place. (By contrast, he never sees fit to mention the many thousands of indigenous people being killed in Indonesia’s unending war to control the western part of New Guinea.)

But it would be wrong to dismiss Diamond simply for lacking answers, because doing so would ignore how he imparts a worldview as powerful as it is problematic. He is the latest acolyte of the longstanding fantasy that every society on earth can be transparently observed, neatly classified and optimally ordered through the expert deployment of reason. The most revealing features of his book are the massive, superfluous tables that litter it. Why spend a page and a half listing and categorizing the objects traded by thirteen apparently arbitrarily selected traditional societies? What is Diamond’s readership supposed to make of the disembodied facts that shells, paint and betelnut were luxury goods on the Andaman Islands; ivory, for the North Slope Inuit; pigs’ and dogs’ teeth, paint, ochre, beads, betelnut (again) and tobacco on the Siassi Islands; and so forth? The accretion of organized data conveys Diamond’s confidence that every society can be mastered, its best practices extracted and inserted into a kind of super-society infused with the universal wisdom of mankind. For a ranking member of the twenty-first-century American intellectual elite, what conceit could be more ethnocentric?

After one has dutifully slogged through all the societies and typologies packed into this tome, it’s Diamond’s story of an American friend that lingers. This friend “traveled half-way around the world to meet a recently discovered band of New Guinea forest hunter-gatherers,” Diamond relates, “only to discover that half of them had already chosen to move to an Indonesian village and put on T-shirts, because life there was safer and more comfortable.” They explained their decision: “Rice to eat, and no more mosquitoes!” Putting the “yesterday” of Diamond’s new book behind them, the new Indonesians faced the only eternal question: now what? By the final page, despite the hundreds preceding it, the reader is left asking the same thing. No doubt small-scale societies have much to teach, if one does not limit from the start the lessons to be learned. In Diamond’s canoe, even when it capsizes, the journey is suspiciously tranquil, and there’s never any question it will end up back in the parking lot where our SUVs await. ■