

Cephu's choice

Nancy Scheper-Hughes

Is it natural for human beings to want personal liberty? Or is it a peculiarly Western concern? Nancy Scheper-Hughes draws some conclusions from indigenous cultures around the world.

Imagine a small clearing in the Ituri forest of Zaire. A band of Mbuti pygmies are returning from a hunt. The women have run ahead of the game nets carried by the men to beat the ground and the bushes, terrifying small animals so that they rush blindly and headlong into the traps. The game, collectively caught, is carefully redistributed at the base camp.

But one of the hunters, wily Cephu, has cheated. Running ahead of the group he captured some of the game before they ran into the nets, and Cephu and his wife enjoyed the advantage of an early meal. Found out, Cephu is punished, told that if he does not wish to behave like a human being, that is, like a Mbuti – he is free to go his own way...alone. In other words, Cephu is banished.

But before two nights pass the hunter crawls back to the base camp, shamefaced and repentant. He has learned the lesson: outside the band there is only the 'freedom' of hunger, fear and isolation. Mbuti conceptions of liberty paradoxically imply constraint. Here, liberty means the relative freedom from danger and scarcity through participation in a closed and demanding but reciprocal human community.

This vignette – recounted by Colin Turnbull in his anthropological classic 'The Forest People' – reveals a basic paradox in the nature of human freedom. Humans are among the most social of creatures while yet the most self-consciously aware of, and tormented by, the limitations that living in social groups demand. 'Man [sic] is double,' wrote sociologist Durkheim. 'Individual and social', and there is the rub. Human aspirations for liberty and independence are founded on bio-evolutionary constraints that we are not free to reject, except at a very high cost. These constraints are more visible in small-scale, non-Western societies where human survival is completely dependent on an immediate and balanced reciprocity that requires the subordination of individual goals and desires to larger collective needs.

I think, for example, of a poignant scene from Napoleon Chagnon's ethnographic film, 'The Feast', about the Yanomani Indians who inhabit a remote corner of the Amazon near the Brazilian border with Venezuela. Fierce raids by renegade bands, as well as by Brazilian miners, have forced the Yanomani into new allegiances with former enemies. The film captures the scene of a three-day feast of dance, food and gift-exchange that symbolizes and solidifies the new bond of trust forged between two former enemy bands.

The headman of the host village calls on each of his fellows to come forward and 'offer up' a prized possession which is given to a member of the other band. One elderly man cowers in the back of the circle of squatting men holding tight to his pet dog, a mangy mut. But then he, too, is called forward by the headman to surrender his pet as a peace offering. The man hesitates and cries out in protest. 'No, I don't want to give up my dog!' He jumps up and stamps his foot in anger.

No one says a word, but all stare at the old man fixedly until he realizes that no one is about to support him and he reluctantly hands over his dog to a man from the other band. As he returns to his place in the circle, the old man shakes his head sadly and mumbles, 'I better get something good next time'.

There never was a 'noble savage' living as a free spirit in an enviable 'state of nature'. On the contrary, many traditional societies lack a conception of liberty altogether for this requires a notion of 'the person' or 'the individual' and thereby 'the self'. Such ideas are often either absent entirely or weakly defined.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has argued that Western conceptions of 'the person' as a bounded, unique and separate entity and 'the self' as a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action are actually rather peculiar notions within the context of world cultures. In many traditional societies, instead of individuals there are roles and statuses which particular actors may inhabit for a time but which are eventually passed on to the next 'occupant' of the role. What is valued in collectivist societies is continuity and repetition, not individuation and difference. The western idea of 'liberty' was developed to protect the latter values and has little meaning in the former.

In western industrial societies individual personal names have an almost sacred quality and are endowed along with rights of 'personhood' on every infant at birth. But babies in many traditional and peasant societies may go unnamed for the first several months or even years of their lives during which time they are called by such nondescript pet names as 'baby', 'sugar' or 'little bit of nothing'. When finally named they may be given a generic name – such as 'Mary' anywhere in the Catholic world – or be called by some version of 'first-born' or 'number one' or 'last-born'. This draws attention to the infant's social status rather than to any particular quality of the child as a 'person'.

Perhaps the highest praise accorded to a child in such collectivist societies is to be named simply 'man' or 'human being' as was Ishi, the celebrated last surviving 'wild' Californian Indian, or the late South African founder of the Black Consciousness Movement, 'Stephen' Biko. His actual given name at birth was 'Bantu', simply meaning 'man' or 'people' and the legacy of his personal name was a source of strength to Stephen who sometimes – and only partly in jest – referred to himself by the rather blasphemous term 'son of man'.

Finally, in rural Northeast Brazil, where death claims a great many infants, a new-born is often given the name of the last child that died in the family. This emphasizes the essential social principle that while family and communities are permanent, individual actors are replaceable. The saying 'you can't take it with you when you die' applies equally in these societies to a notion of 'the self'.

Traditional and collectivist views of naming fly directly in the face of western notions of individual human rights exemplified in Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which reads: 'The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a personal name'. Though seemingly innocuous and self-evident, this article actually stands in flagrant disregard and opposition to the way many non-western people view the meaning of human life and death.

The Zinacanteco Mexican Indians think of each 'new' person as not new at all but rather as a composite, made up of 'soul stuff' borrowed from a repository of the souls of deceased ancestral Zinacantecos. At death the soul leaves the body and returns to whence it came – a kind of soul bank kept by the gods. This spiritual reservoir is used for the creation of new human beings, each of whom is made up of at least 13 parts from the souls of former living persons. There is no sense that each Zinacanteco infant is brand new or a totally unique individual. Rather, each person is but a fraction of the whole Zinacanteco spiritual and social world. This means that individual 'claims' and demands are not backed up by the cosmological system which support instead a sort of tyranny of the collective, which anthropologist Laura Nader has labelled 'harmony ideology'. Freedom is sacrificed for equality, and the seemingly easy and natural consensus that is reached is often forced and extracted through

subtle forms of threat and group pressure – a common feature of collectivist societies, whether traditional or modern.

Among Australian aborigines of the Western Desert, each new person comes into the world circumscribed by ancestral origin myths about 'Dreamtime' which structure the world and rigidly define the place of all aboriginal people within it. The myths determine each person's position and the marriage strategies, kinship ties and friendship alliances that each must pursue in adherence to the sacred geography and its accompanying moral economy. 'The Dreaming', wrote William Stanner, 'determines not only what life is, but also what it can be. Life, so to speak, is a one-possibility thing'. In this aboriginal society there is no sense of personal 'agency' fundamental to western notions of liberty and democracy. Nor is there any idea of an individual search for personal salvation which Christian missionaries have tried, but normally failed, to communicate.

Even more striking, however, are Australian aboriginal ways of death. Neither individual biology nor personal choice decides the time of a person's death, which is also collectivized. Harry Eastwell, a psychiatrist practising for a time in the Western Desert in remote outpost clinics, discovered that certain old and enfeebled persons die according to a social script that is initiated by a collective 'sing'. When the old or sick person hears the songs that foretell his or her passage to the next world, he or she suffers a 'mortification' process. This begins with a separation from the group (usually by lying at a slight distance, alone on a mat in the sun), moves towards a psychological acquiescence to death, and concludes with the death itself, normally due to dehydration.

Here, the social group decides the timing of the death and the individual is expected to conform graciously and to express the sentiment that: 'This is, indeed, a good time to die'. From social birth to social death, the trajectory of the aboriginal person's entire life course is predetermined. No wonder the crude designs to assimilate such peoples into Western culture have failed.

However, even in the most collectivist human societies individuals still have choices and exercise certain liberties. Marriages may be prearranged for Kalahari San or Mbuti pygmy girls against their wishes. But they can still make life so miserable for the unwanted spouse that he leaves the hut, so the girls can then choose a subsequent partner for themselves. Similarly, Australian aboriginal youths born into one camp can, when they reach adolescence, move freely among different camping groups and choose a marriage partner for themselves – as long as she fits the general design of the Dreamtime myths.

Small-scale, collectivist societies like the Mbuti Pygmies, the Kung San and the Australian first peoples are often romanticized as harmonious, balanced and egalitarian – and they are. But, as I have tried to show, this harmony is extracted at a high, personal cost, in the absence of or with a low price placed on personal liberty. In putting individual bodies, desires and goals at the disposal of the group such societies necessarily do violence to Western notions of bodily integrity, habeas corpus, personal autonomy and free choice.

Australian aboriginal peoples – and many highland New Guinea groups too – practice severe forms of penile mutilation, slashing open the urethra, scourging it with abrasive stalks of grass, mutilating the glans or infibulating it. The purpose is to initiate young men to collective life by inscribing the discipline of the group onto the docile flesh of new recruits. Similarly brutal practices of female circumcision – particularly Sudanese 'infibulation' by means of which young girls are made 'women' by cutting away the 'unsightly' clitoris and both sets of labia – have been criticized by human rights and feminist organizations. But the liberal and progressive world has been strangely silent when the body in question and under the knife has been male.

The very severity of these body rituals – and these are the most extreme examples – are intended to remind young initiates of the awesome primacy of the Body Social over the Body Individual. When indigenous people defend their initiation practices against the liberal, democratic dictates that attempt to abolish or modify them, the traditionalists assert the symbolic and religious charters upon which the rites are based. What ensues is a fundamental and irreconcilable clash of cultures – one modern, individualist and secular, the other ‘traditional’, collectivist and sacred. It is another version of the dialectic between liberty and equality that Alexis de Tocqueville identified in his travels through America in the 1830s, a dialectic that has tended to be resolved over time in defense of liberty and at the expense of equality in the US.

The dialectic between freedom and equality on the one hand and individual autonomy and collective harmony on the other, remains an unfinished and perhaps irresolvable human project. Human societies and cultures are essentially variable and highly resistant to a single definition of ‘the good’. While attempts at building cross-cultural charters and constitutions that promote human rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are laudable, one should keep in mind that these values may be in contention. The very idea of freedom is culturally shaped, historically situated and highly specific: it can never be reduced to a single, essential or universal meaning.

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