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THE NEW HEADHUNTING PSYCHOLOGY

IN FACING THE MOST FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE since our ape-ancestors came down from the trees—the challenge of nuclear tests and the nuclear arms race—we moderns seem unable to see ourselves as we would look to an external eye. It may appear rash to assert that psychologically we are in a class with cannibals, headhunters, human sacrificers, and the authors of a thousand outlived atrocities. But no other conclusion is possible when we glance out across the dark back-roads of history.

What, one may ask, is the state of mind that enables major portions of the present-day world to compete in developing hydrogen bombs, intercontinental missiles, and rocket-hurling submarines? What is it that reconciles us to the realization that these tools are made to be used, yet cannot be used without obliterating human life over large sections of the earth? How is it that we can accept complacently the knowledge that, even if we stop short of war but continue nuclear testing, many thousands and perhaps many millions of our fellow men will be born with avoidable genetic deficiencies, while multitudes will be doomed to slow wasting and death by leukemia and bone cancer? Is it that we moderns are criminally brutal, and outrageously callous?

Since we know that we are not so brutal and callous in other respects, we may be sure that there is here some special factor that leads us into a psychological blind chamber, and walls us off from the realities. Nuclear arms and the nuclear tests, we tell ourselves with firm conviction, are necessary for defence against our enemies. Unhappily, we do not see that this is precisely the argument behind some of the most monstrous practices of all time. Our justification is the old one that rang out when the Maori unhesitatingly killed the violator of a sacred *tapu* (taboo), or when the Papuan slew the wizard he believed responsible for a death, even though the result would be inter-tribal war. In such cases the murderer was not ruthless or inhuman—not at all, according to his own way of thinking: he was merely taking a simple, necessary step to drive out the devils. And the step really was simple, it really was necessary, once you had accepted the premises: that the death-dealing

wizard must be put out of the way before he felled fresh victims, or that devils in the shape of disembodied spirits must be appeased by punishment of the taboo-violator.

Now we moderns, of course, do not use obsolete terms such as "wizards" and "devils"; we think of our enemies as "Russians" or "Communists", while they refer to us as "decadent capitalists". This, however, represents a difference in nomenclature rather than in point of view. In order to observe how true this is, let us glance back at a few practices of the pre-atomic age.

We may begin with headhunting. This gentlemanly custom, by which sneak-raiders would swoop down upon neighbouring tribesman (or tribeswomen) and relieve the unwary of their heads, has been popular in various parts of the earth. But such blood-letting was not a crime—not in the eyes of its perpetrators. On the contrary, it was a meritorious action, which might be necessary to insure good crops or successes in war or the hunt, and might represent a front line of personal or tribal defence, since the gods or the ghosts of ancestors would smite the unworthy descendant who did not capture a head or two.

Thus, among some of the world's most celebrated headhunters, the Jibaros of Ecuador, the wandering soul of a murdered relation may enjoy no rest until the head-gatherer brings the slayer to justice; while the severed head may be a miraculous fetish that drives off the demons and causes the crops to grow. Among the Dyaks of Borneo, similar reasons prevailed: the ghosts of ancestors commanded the taking of heads; it was more necessary to placate these potent entities than to please the white man, and therefore the head-clipping continued in the face of Government prohibitions—and this although the Dyaks have been generally described as a mild and gentle people. Headhunting, in other words, was a form of national defence. As such, it overrode all other considerations. A few incidental deaths were of little account.

The same, to a lesser degree, was true of another custom that we moderns can hardly mention without a shudder: cannibalism. The cannibal was not always driven by mere greed for human flesh—no, far from that! He too was engaged, in his own way, in a form of defence. For, when you ate an enemy, you consumed not only his organs and muscles but his strength and virtues. At the same time, you might devour his very spirit, destroying him utterly, and making it impossible for him to strike at you from the Afterworld. With such advantages in prospect, who would be so sentimental as to refrain from human flesh? In fact, who would not kill an occasional enemy simply for the benefit of eating him?

Such reasoning also prevailed, for example, among the Namau of New

Guinea, where the spirit or *imamu* of the eaten man was supposed to enter into the eater and enhance his fighting abilities. It was much the same among the Batak of Sumatra, for whom man-eating was a way of getting rid of evil-doers; not only war-captives, but traitors, spies, and adulterers might be annihilated by means of the cooking-pot. Even comparatively advanced peoples have followed this supposed method of self-defence or self-enhancement: the ancient Scandinavian warrior drank the dead man's blood, hoping thereby to imbibe his merits; and more than one people has eaten the hearts of victims: it was recorded in China as late as 1912 that the heart of the executed leader of a rebellion was cooked and distributed among the slayers as a means of transmitting his virtues. All such practices, however repugnant on other grounds, were adopted as a means of self-improvement or self-defence. Again, one has only to accept the premises—and the rite becomes logical, if not inevitable.

The same remarks may be made of a third institution, which has spattered blood across many lands. To us moderns, few things may seem more horrible or more absurd than to slaughter men, women, or children in order to win the favour of unseen gods or ghosts. Yet to many people this slaughter has appeared natural and necessary. The delusion has taken two main forms: the first, and on the whole the less sanguinary, has been in the nature of after-life insurance: a king or noble, about to die, wishing to be well protected in the Hereafter, takes with him a retinue of servants, retainers, and wives sufficient for his needs. This salutary purpose, in many regions, has been achieved with great ceremony and much bloodshed. Thus among the Mang-bettou of Africa, five women were selected from the widows of the "big chief" and were strangled and deposited about the tomb of their lord. Similarly, on the death of the infamous Zulu chieftain Chaka, ten young girls were buried alive and hundreds of persons were massacred. On the passing of the book-burning Chinese emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, who died in 211 B.C., many workmen and all the ruler's childless wives were entombed with him. Among the early Japanese, the Scythians, the Sumerians, and others, the same insurance methods prevailed; and an extension of the custom is to be seen in the *suttee* or widow-burning, by which multitudes of Hindu women throughout the centuries were all but driven to the pyre before abolition of the practice by the British.

The second form of human sacrifice—that of devil-appeasement or placation of the wrathful gods—seems to have been even more widespread. Traces of it are to be seen in the Bible, as in Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. It was known in early Italy and Greece, and in Babylonia and Phoenicia; among the Khonds of

India, captives known as *meriahs* were raised to be sacrificed, in order to propitiate the agricultural gods; among the Mayas, young girls were drowned in the sacred well of Chichen-Itza in Yucatan so as to elicit the favours of the rain-god; among the Incas, to judge from the evidence of the bodies dug up at the graveyard of the Sun Temple at Pachacamac, maidens were offered up to the sun-god. And among the Aztecs, human sacrifices occurred on almost every occasion—in honour of Xipe, a flayed divinity who wore a human skin; in honour of Tlaloc, the rain-god; in honour of Tezcatlipoca, god of the air; and, most of all, in honour of the war-god Huitzilopochtli, in whose worship multitudes of hearts, conservatively estimated at about twenty thousand a year, were wrenched out of throbbing bodies.

But how are such abominations possible? Again, very simply, once one accepts the premises. If you are convinced that you must protect yourself against want and inattention in the next world, and if your needs may be met by taking your wives and servants with you, then what more natural than that these subordinates should be knocked on the head or burned to fit them to accompany you? This would be mere prudence—and self-protection. And if you lived in fear of redoubtable deities, who controlled the rain on which your very life depended or who decided your success or failure in war, who were you to begrudge a few menial lives so that the gods might feast and receive your appeals with favour? It is only in our eyes that the practices appear monstrous. To the human sacrificers, unable to see beyond the blank walls of their own thinking, the custom seemed both reasonable and necessary.

Not innate viciousness or brutality, likewise, but fear of unseen and inscrutable powers lay behind the witchcraft craze, which has dominated many savage and civilized lands but came to its apogee in early modern times. Today we stand aghast at the spectacle of educated and cultured men pointing the finger of condemnation at supposed witches, and complacently watching them burn. How could this be? Again, we have only to accept the premises: that there are devils abroad in the world; that nefarious powers of evil are plying their secret arts, and may strike with sudden disaster, illness, or death; and that some defence against them is imperative. Against such vile wickedness, any measures would be justified; and if the sorcerers or sorceresses can be caught and burned or hanged, they not only will be justly punished and happily restrained from further wrongdoing, but their dire fate will discourage other witches. Such was the attitude of mind; it was not mere cruelty that was at the roots, but the naïve acceptance of certain common beliefs and the resultant terror, leading to a frenzy of supposed protective strokes. World defence, three or

four centuries ago, seemed largely a matter of putting down the witches.

It was the same story with heretic-burnings, and with the tortures and *autos-da-fé* of the Inquisition: again, the Devil had entered into the unorthodox, and had to be driven out, even by the extreme remedy of fire. Something similar may be said of various other iniquities that have darkened the centuries: the making of scapegoats, the pogroms and persecutions and crusades, the religious repressions, many of the outrages of slavery and warfare, and a thousand and one miscellaneous horrors, for which it is impossible to find space within the limits of a brief article. But it is needless to go on, since all the examples illustrate the same point—a point of particular pertinency for our own age.

This point is that once men have accepted false premises they enter a psychological blind alley that permits any extremes whatever for the sake of a supposed self-protection, which more often than not takes the form of defence against imagined fiends or devils. We have here the explanation of headhunting, of cannibalism, of human sacrifice, of the witchcraft persecutions, of heretic-burning. Coming down to our own day, we have the explanation of our attitude toward hydrogen tests and the nuclear arms race.

Here are matters which, from an external point of view, are not less monstrous than headhunting, cannibalism, or human sacrifice: matters involving the possible destruction of much or all of the human race, while at the very least we must tolerate the maiming or slow death of multitudes through invisible radiations (a form of human sacrifice perhaps more subtle but not less real than was practised by the Aztecs). Nevertheless, our attitude toward the hydrogen tests and the arms race is logical—once we adopt the premises that there are devils abroad, against whom no defence is possible by other than thermonuclear means. Having accepted these premises, we are in a state of mind precisely like that of the man-slaying Mayan or Aztec priest; we are in a psychological *cul-de-sac*, too terrorized and mentally too shut-in to consider any alternative. Hence we are ready to embrace horrors infinitely more dreadful than those of the cannibal islands. Worse still, we are likely to continue to embrace the new horrors until we re-examine our premises, open our eyes, and see ourselves as we really are—the spiritual brothers of headhunters, witch-hunters, heretic-burners, and human sacrificers.

However, if we do open our eyes in time and see what company we have been keeping, perhaps we shall wheel about in sudden revulsion of spirit, escape from our psychological blind alley, and seek some reasonable way out of the world's dilemma. Otherwise, the new headhunting psychology can lead only to one end: obliteration.