



# TRIBAL CONFLICT: PROVEN PATTERN, DYSFUNCTIONAL INHERITANCE

*This previously unpublished article (written in 1999) explores the subject of internal co-operation and external competition in human society as part of an expansive view of the permaculture principle of **Integrate Rather Than Segregate**. It outlines ideas which have been the subject of informal discussions on Permaculture Design Course over many years.*



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The tribal organisation in “prehistoric” world can be seen as analogous to a cell with women and children forming the nucleus of core functions while men provided an infrastructure of support and membrane to filter outside influences and impacts. Within this structure there was a high degree of integration and mutualistic functions.

However the tribal conception of ethics generally made a distinction between people of the tribe and other humans (aliens). This concept was quite ecologically functional for perhaps a hundred thousand years of human culture. In that world, widely separated tribes existed largely in their own domains with relatively little interaction on a regular basis with aliens. Occasional conflict on a battlefield acted as a way to apply selection pressure on surplus young males without the conflict having too much adverse impact on the tribe as a whole<sup>1</sup>. The more rapid colonisation of the planet by people following the retreat of the last ice age over the last 12,000 years and more particularly the emergence of agriculture, urban civilisation, the standing army and the expansion in power over other peoples, which began about 6000 years ago, has changed the situation of the tribes radically<sup>2</sup>.

About 2500 years ago, new spiritual and ethical traditions began to develop (such as Christianity) which involved the then novel idea that “all humans are people”. Over the last two millennia, humanity has been struggling to integrate this new ethical framework. Over the course of the 20th century we have seen this idea emerge as an almost universally accepted truth at the same time that we have experienced some of the largest scale examples of genocide and related expressions of tribalism gone wrong.

Like the war against nature, the war between peoples is a crisis for human civilisation which must see resolution and fundamental transmutation if we are to survive. Most people find it perplexing and depressing that at the end of the 20th century we seem to have got nowhere in this matter. I think there are good reasons for optimism despite the nightly news.

In nature and in people, patterns of form and behaviour which have proven adaptive over long periods of time become deeply embedded within the structure and design of the system. In this way nature is conservative, not giving up easily on proven pathways. When these deeply embedded systems do prove to be dysfunctional, the evolution of fundamentally different patterns is fraught with difficulty.

In human psychology we know that when individuals reject some inherited behaviour, lifestyle or culture, they often find a substitute which although radical different in form, recreates many of elements and functions of the rejected pattern. In politics and history, revolutionary ideas and movements sometimes recreate what they sought to overturn. Although these processes seem to suggest the circle is a more accurate describer of human history than the arrow, the spiral is perhaps closest where things do go around but also move on.

1 As occurred in the New Guinea highlands at the time of European contact.

2 See Mumford, L. *The City In History*, one of the classic works which links these changes together.

As the dysfunction, falsity or evil in the old pattern becomes more obvious, its repeated emergence becomes more concentrated and often contained in a way that the wider system can begin to see this old pattern as something external to itself which can in the end be discarded completely. The way the body can often condense a systemic illness into a toxic sore or excretion as part of a healing process is a fundamental example which goes beyond metaphor. The old religious concept of exorcism where an evil within a person is firstly perceived as a foreign being and is then expelled leaving the person intact was a way of dealing with what we might call psychological illness which otherwise may have remained systemic.

In this context it is not hard to understand why at the end of the 20th century, we see so many examples of human conflict such as Palestine, Rwanda, Bosnia and Timor which are almost caricatures of human conflict through the ages. We might be well beyond moral edicts to love thy neighbour in dealing with intractable ethnic conflict, but as more resources are focused on a range of approaches to conflict resolution, the limitations of many of the mainstream solutions are becoming clearer. Unfortunately the dominant alternative offered to entrenched obsession with the tribal past, is an acceleration into the fully alienated world of market capitalism and individual consumerism.

Dealing with the psychosocial roots of the problems requires more bottom up network support for the “natural nurturers”<sup>3</sup> within communities and letting larger scale systems of governance and economy grow organically.

In the most intractable conflicts it seems that the leadership of women is often critical to bypassing the old ways which are so often inextricably tied to masculine notions of identity, honour and function.

These more organic methods are more likely to disarm and dismantle human conflict where they accept aggression as simply a once functional behaviour which we can discard like a worn out set of shoes if we have some new shoes to wear.

3 A term used within the Laceweb network. Laceweb is based on the work of Dr Neville Yeomans who integrated theoretical and practical aspects of psychosocial transformation in oppressed and traumatised communities. This work is connected to Permaculture by a number of network lineages. See Laceweb web site <http://www.laceweb.org.au/>