



# THE NOBLE SAVAGE?

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The idea of the savage as a foil for civilization is an ancient one, harking back to [Enkidu](#) in [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#) and the Biblical story of [Cain and Abel](#).

Later, it was the Greeks who further categorized the savage as also a barbarian, someone who was not beyond the pale of city but also, and perhaps therefore, beyond the pale of comprehensible language – for the Greek term, [barbaros](#), has as its root the idea of someone speaking gibberish.

More interestingly, Homer refers to civilized men as “[bread-eaters](#),” opposite whom is the barbarity of the [Cyclops](#) and [Laestrygonians](#).

The savage, in effect, stands in enmity to civilization, which is mankind's highest form of striving, in that it embodies virtue, morality, truth and beauty. Indeed, it is the entire absence of beauty which marks the savage.

It is also commonly assumed that Jean-Jacques Rousseau attributed nobility to the savage, with the term “Noble Savage.” But this is a false attribution, since Rousseau never really uses this term. Rather, this term has its root in English literary history, from [Dryden](#) to [Smollett](#).

In our own time, there has been a strong reaction against such characterization of people, and many academic careers have been established railing against “[Eurocentrism](#)” which supposedly grades people according to race, and so forth.

This is the classic argument of those that seek to portray Europeans as arch-racists, going about the world, enslaving everybody. Suffice to say those that till this field have [secured cushy jobs](#) in academia.

In place of the savage, it is now commonplace to seek out all manner of “wisdom” among primitive societies, especially among the so-called indigenous inhabitants of various lands, who are seen as [holders and preservers](#) of some sort of arcane, hidden knowledge, passed on from one generation to the next. Of course, no one bothers to ask why all this “wisdom” always tends to pander to the “spiritual” vacuity of the West.

Thus, the indigenous “native” is touted as possessing innate expertise in all things environmental and occultish, with deep words about harmony and nature and preservation. Never mind that most of this “wisdom” is simply a reduction of the various psychoses that occupy the West, which has chosen to jettison its own culture history, religion and morality – and having emptied itself, now falls victim to anything that looks attractive.

It's really the “[pizza effect](#),” where the Italians had no notion of what a pizza was, because it is an American invention. But with the popularity of the pizza, and its attribution to Italy, it wasn't long before the people of Italy claimed the pizza as their own. The same can be said of yoga and India (but that's

another topic).

All this romanticizing of the Other, in order to destroy the Self, obscures the fact that the savage has nothing noble about him; his world is determined by animism, ritualism, and monism. All three, point to one conclusion – that the savage has no mind.

But to be clear, the state of mindlessness does not mean being brainless. The savage may well be animated by emotion, motivation, and certainly will (especially in the practice of magic). Nevertheless, the mind is a different state of being.

Briefly, the mind is not invented, but rather discovered through a gradual process of questioning. This means that the mind seeks not to harmonize individual existence with the forces of nature – for that is simply instinct – but rather it seeks to understand, explain and then create. This threefold process is not available to the savage mind, which is animated but not creative.

But what is the savage?

First and foremost, he is a shaman (this peculiar word stems from an old Turkic root, *kam* with cognates in Tungush and Mongol, which means “dancer,” “mover”).

The shaman seeks to manage (not control) the myriad forces of natural objects and creatures, in order to either forestall harm, or gather benefit.

In other words, the savage is someone who seeks not to understand reality, but to control it by way of ritual and magic. Thus, the savage is an animator of nature. This leads him to a monism of sorts, where all of creation is made alive by one essential, unchanging force – the one in all.

As a result, ritual and magic justify and explain all human action. Some may mistake this as a version of scientific thinking, in that it seems to point to a cause-and-effect approach. But that would be wrong.

Ritual and magic are not about cause-and-effect at all. Rather, both are part of monistic thinking which imagines that the one spirit animating all of nature is open to manipulation through the will of someone in the know (the shaman).

It's in this triad of will, secret knowledge, and force that the savage opens himself up to all kinds of violence and abuse – because in order to exert his will, magic and ritual are the weapons he deploys to counter and manipulate the influence of all that surrounds him.

In this contention of the shaman against supernatural influences, there is only the matter of control, whether effectual or not. And control means material benefit. There is no individuality here, only a desire to become a mindless force that does what it does, without an explanation. In other words, the savage has only one recourse in order to live – violence.

Therefore, the savage has no moral structures, because he does not need them. Force can only be met with counter-force. Hence all the blood rituals, violence and cruelty...

Such as, the [kanaimà](#) among the natives of South America; [marriage](#) of women to animals in India; [child sacrifice](#); [self-impalement](#); [scalp dancing](#) and [cannibalism](#) among natives of North America; [endocannibalism](#) among the Yanomamo; the prolonged torture of children before ritual murder among the [Aztec](#), the [Maya](#) and the [Toltec](#); [female genital mutilation](#); the beating girls in [Uaupes](#); [placenta eating](#); the [murder of mingi-children](#) in Ethiopia; semen-drinking by [Edolo](#) and [Sambia](#) boys; [La Esperanza rain ceremony](#); the [Kusasa fumbi](#) of Malawi; the [Kuthiyottam ritual](#); [tooth-chiselling](#) of young girls.

This is all about the manipulation of flesh, the spilling of blood, and the inflicting pain in order to gain some perceived benefit, and then to animate the shaman.

And this brief litany of savagery is not only meted out to humans. Animals undergo far greater and crueller treatment, which it would be gruesome to catalogue here.

Savage societies, far from being noble to the environment have undertaken [deforestation](#), [extinction](#) of animal and plant species and often have had radically [altered the landscape](#). So, the entire nobility narrative rings false – thus, it's really about the concerns of present-day society, which seeks a utopia to hold high as a example.

The "noble savage" never existed. Nobility is the result of profound moral insight and conduct. Savagery, on the other hand, is the absence of morality, the absence of civilization, and the absence of rationality. When mankind is bereft of these three structures of enabling the good like – what is left but savagery – blood, flesh, and pain?

Is it any wonder that as the West slowly loses its connection with its root, namely, Christianity, there is the sudden re-emergence of [paganism](#), [shamanism](#), [animism](#), and [savagery](#)?

Once we walk away from those ideas that create civilization, there can only be chaos.

***The [photo](#) shows, "Cannibal Feast on the Island of Tanna, New Hebrides," by Charles E. Gordon Frazer, ca, 1891.***

