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Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response by Colonialism

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In the film, “Trobian Cricket: An Ingenious Response to Colonialism,”<sup>1</sup> a team of anthropologists document the history and practice of cricket games the Trobriand tribe of New Guinea play. Cricket, one of Britain’s favorite sports, is a source of pride and a symbol of British culture; when missionaries came to New Guinea, they brought the game with them. While some islanders played the game according to British rules, this Western version of cricket was difficult and awkward for the Trobriands to play. Over time, they changed the rules and norms that surrounded the game; the film leads us to believe that the culture turned the game into an activity that was meaningful and comfortable for the tribes. We see the pride that teams have in their chants, marches, body paint, and magic spells and assume that the Trobriand version of cricket is an empowering resistance in the face of British colonialism.

Yet, there is something wrong with this notion. Embracing Trobriand cricket as an instance in which domineering cultural empires were repelled is a flawed concept which masks the very forms of domination that it attempts to criticize. The filmmakers wish the viewer to form the opinion that primitive tribes resisted and even co-opted colonial attempts at assimilation. Our politically-correct concepts of racism and colonialism tell us to congratulate the Trobriands for their clever act and possibly emulate it ourselves. However, what we initially see as an ‘ingenious response to colonialism’ turns out to be an ingenious response by colonialism instead.

On the surface, Trobriand cricket seems to be a reflection of the native culture. The film describes cricket matches as a replacement for tribal battles; those participating in the game perform the same ceremonial acts (face painting, magic spells, rituals, and chants) that their ancestors performed before they went to war. Furthermore, some celebratory chants that teams perform after small victories reflect ancient legends and histories. This can be seen as a form of oral history in

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<sup>1</sup> Leach, J., & Kildea, G. (1976). *Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response to Colonialism* [Motion picture]. United States: University of California at Berkeley Extension Center for Media.

which stories are passed from generation to generation; instead of around the campfire, they are now spread on the cricket lawn. The assumption can easily be made that Trobriand cricket is a positive cultural activity.

If a deeper analysis is performed, it is clear that Trobriand cricket detaches the tribes from their history and military forces, leaving them powerless and open to domination. While the first generation of Trobriand cricket players most certainly remembered the historical and military context of the ceremonial acts, those who grow up in a post-cricket world are likely to see the rituals as nothing more than game play. There is no context for children to place the rituals in, as cricket has rendered war obsolete. The fact that in Trobriand society, throwing the ball has replaced throwing the spear is a symbolic event; all the traditional methods that the Trobriands have for keeping history, protecting their interests, and defending themselves are gone. There are no more enemies, only competitors. The new generations are not taught war and history through cricket; they are taught that war and history *are* cricket.

This is the “peaceful” fantasy of the liberal-democratic order fulfilled in totality. The Trobriand people would be in the same powerless position if the British had forbidden weapons, ceremonial rituals, and wartime preparations under threat of punishment or execution (an act that has precedence). In both of these worlds, the Trobriand tribes are disarmed and harmless; however, in the current version of events, both the Trobriands and cultural theorists embrace the situation, something that could not be said if the British had used force and violence. This is the worst form of domination, the kind that performed by the self and seen as liberation.

Current trends of postmodern thought hold to the view that fear of the Other is something to be avoided. Constituting the Trobriands as brutal savages because they have war rituals in their culture would be an ignorant and racist viewpoint. However, instead of changing the self to embrace the Other, there is a tendency to turn the horrific “Other” into a more manageable “other” which we can then embrace. The West creates myth of the noble savage – the construction of the

primitive Other as a being that is no different from us. This is dangerous; when we see the Other as just a different self, the next logical step is to assume that they think like we do and want what we want. Cultural assimilation becomes charity as the West gives the “gifts” of modernity: capitalism, classical liberalism, and political realism. Not only is the true nature of these gifts in question, the very notion of the cultural gift reifies the realpolitik system of international relations. This model, which views nation states as primary actors, is contradictory to native culture; yet, throughout history, the “gift” of geopolitical borders and sovereign recognition has been couched in the prison of reservations and used to justify assimilation.

This process of cultural domination is not an abstract concept; it is shown directly by several rituals that Trobriands perform. While some teams incorporate tribal stories into their chants and marches, many more portray Western concepts. One team mimics Allied aircraft that were stationed on the island during World War II. Others refer to their nimble hands as “PK,” a popular brand of Allied chewing gum. For a game that is suggested to be liberation from Western dominance, it takes capitalist consumerism to a whole new level. The players do not wish simply to chew PK gum or pilot an aircraft; they express a desire to become these products of the West.

These criticisms are not intrinsic to the game of cricket. The British version, in contrast, does not retell history, replace the military, or even appear to serve as an embodiment of British culture. British cricket is history, not a telling of it; players and teams write new lines in history books instead of reciting old ones. Furthermore, those who play cricket see it as a recreational sport, not a military game. British cricket is fairly tame; games are slow-paced and last days. Finally, British cricket is more a part of British culture than it is a reflection of it. Fans do not enjoy the game because it somehow stands for the society they love; they enjoy the game because it is part of society they love. In fact, one reason that cricket is such a part of British culture may be precisely because it does *not* reflect it. The fast-paced capitalist society that is present in Western

nations is more like the high-energy game of football (soccer) and rugby than cricket. Those who are a bit weary of the society can take a break with cricket before returning to their normal lives.

While British cricket may not reflect British society, Trobriand cricket can be seen as a reflection of certain British societal traditions. Of course, the face painting and chants are not indicative of British culture, but the way that Trobriand cricket evolved has similarities to British cultural hegemony. In fact, the story of cricket in Trobriand is a microcosm for the history of British colonization. In the beginning of the Empire, British troops colonized certain areas, just as missionaries taught cricket to islanders. In both instances, the subjects of colonization did not like their fate and rebelled. India, America, and colonies in Africa and Asia revolted, forming independent states; the Trobriands quit cricket proper and started their own game. As time passed, previous British colonies (America and India especially) became significant trading partners with Britain and share many aspects of culture. Likewise, Trobriand cricket has become westernized in regards to some rituals. The cycle has come full circle – just as young Indians fight for the chance to speak with Western accents in outsourced call centers, young Trobriands taunt their opponents by implying that they are more Western in their supposed “ingenious response to colonialism.”

While the Trobriands appeared to co-opt the colonial forces that attempted to assimilate them, in reality they simply fell into a devastating trap which turned their meaningful cultural history and practical military experience into a game for the rest of the world to watch. This event is indicative of liberal-democratic realism, which views sovereign states as the primary actors in the world and seeks to dismantle all other geopolitical entities. Viewing Trobriand cricket as liberation from imperialism only serves to reify this notion and justifies the assimilation of the Other through a merciful gift. Instead of a story of success for the islanders, we should see Trobriand cricket as it truly is: a form of disarmament and cultural assimilation that is more an ingenious response by colonialism than to it.