



## **Episode 41: Tribes Old and New**

**HOST:** This is Origin Stories, The Leakey Foundation Podcast - I'm Meredith Johnson.

Being human means wanting to belong to something bigger than ourselves. We are driven to form bonded groups with strong loyalties, shared names, histories, beliefs, and heritage. In anthropology, these groups are called tribes. They're an essential element of human behavior--so much so that when existing tribes decline, new ones will arise.

Dr. Polly Wiessner is an anthropologist who has studied tribes all over the world. She's conducted 40 years of research among the San of the Kalahari Desert and 30 years among the Enga in Papua New Guinea. Her research focuses on the power of social networks and the ways traditional societies respond to rapid cultural change.

In today's episode, we're sharing a lecture she gave as part of the Leakey Foundation's Survival symposium series.

In this talk, she discusses "Tribes Old and New" what tribes might have been like over human history, why and how tribes form, the emotional and psychological impact of tribal culture on members, and how our tribal nature is evolving.

Here's Polly Wiessner recorded in September 2019 at the Morgan Library in New York.

### **POLLY WIESSNER:**

About 2006, I was in Highland, Papua New Guinea, far out in the bush, interviewing an old tribal leader who was a renowned peacemaker. It was at a very difficult time because, among the Enga of Papua New Guinea, the bow and arrow had been replaced by shotguns and high-powered weapons almost overnight. It was devastating. Schools were burned, churches were burned, people were killed, there was warfare all around.

So I said to him, "This is terrible what your people are doing, what's happening to you. What's going to be your future?" And he looked at me, and he said, "Well, I have a

grandson in town, and he has a house with something called a television. Every once in a while, I go down there and, I look at the television. Seems to me that your tribe has a war going on too." And then he said, "Pretty bad one. Maybe that's where our guns are coming from."

Anyway, so tonight, tribes old and new.

I'm a cultural anthropologist at Arizona State University and the University of Utah, and I'm going to just try to present an idea of what tribes might've been like throughout much of human history. I'm trying to give you an example to sort of think on, of what a tribe might've been like during our evolution.

I've been working with the Enga, who are Highland horticulturalists, numbering about half a million. The Colonial Administration and contact with missions only occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, so we are fairly close to tribes of the past, and the elders remember this. I have a team in Enga, and in the last sort of 30, 35 years, we've recorded the history and traditions of 110 tribes. This is what talk is going to be based on.

What is a tribe? Well, it comes from the word *tribus* in ancient Rome, meaning division of the state. As Europeans moved out over the globe, it was used to describe cultures that were encountered. Europeans, in turn, when they took this concept to rule, and they redefined tribes and created much larger units. In anthropology, the word tribe is a stage of social evolution between forager bands, hunters and gatherers, with face-to-face interaction, small groups, and the state where relations were more anonymous. It now has been applied to groups of 500 to 50,000 with very different forms of organization.

This will just give you an idea. I think it's cut off at the beginning, but these are tribes in Australia before contact, a map of the groups. These are language groups, and they're probably smaller divisions, but estimates are that pre-contact tribes were from about 500 to 2,000 people. Here's a map of tribes in California, which prior to contact, had over 300 language groups and 90 languages. They had from 500 to 2,000 members.

In the tribes of the past, everybody probably had had contact with everybody else. Even Kalahari bushmen, where I also work, know about a thousand other people. So they probably had contacts through ceremonies, visiting, feasting, and some knowledge. The question is, why do you have the near universality of tribes with shared cultural heritage and strong loyalties throughout the world, and yet incredible variation?

The greatest variation that I've seen was in Highland, Papua New Guinea, some Melpa man went over to Paris and saw the Lido dancers, and asked them to come and dance in their cultural celebration. So they came over, and they roughed it. They stayed in the village for 10 days, and then produced this dance together with the Melpa. I asked them Melpa, what they thought of them, and they said, "They're the nicest people in the world, but they're so ugly. They're so tall, and they're so skinny."

Anyway, so the universality probably comes from deeply rooted psychological mechanisms from our primate heritage to form groups with strong loyalty. We probably have a deep phylogeny of the feelings, and the variations come from cultural constructions that give tribes different forms and cultural heritage. These two pictures are ceremonial dancers of different groups in New Guinea. You can see how different it is. So culture plays upon universal tendencies.

In the past, and this is going to be my central argument, tribes were social security systems that cover risks over the lifespan. The first step in creating a tribe is a tribal identity, and Engas trace their tribal founders to nonhuman mythical founders like snakes, bats, hawks. In Enga, there are no stylistic, moral, or religious or linguistic markers between tribes, which is common in the world, within Enga dialect groups, but there are some difference between dialect groups.

Why identity? What's important about identity? People always say, "Oh, identity is everything." Because it makes people feel that they are secured by the group that they identify with, and thus willing to make sacrifices for the group. So when you begin to have identity, tribal identity, it builds society out of what otherwise would have been a collection of self-interested individuals. One old man said, "Our people are like the root and trunk of a tree that has many branches. They stretch out in different directions, but they all grew from one root and trunk."

After the identity, then there are usually genealogies here that link the tribal founder to all the members below. The Enga can trace their family trees back 14 generations often. A very interesting fact is that history matters in all human societies, and this may come from our tribal organization earlier on. Almost every society is fascinated by history, and that's unique for our species.

Tribal identity and the life cycle. During childhood, humans are cooperative breeders.

That means that people of all ages take care and help raise the children and community. Then from the age three on, children spend most of the day in mixed-age playgroups giving and receiving care. So the bonds and affiliations are established. Really emotions of tribal loyalty are born in childhood with these positive interactions. It's a centripetal force, okay?

Then in adolescence, rites of passage bonds cohorts of young men, and these are nearly universal in tribal societies. These are young men, young Enga men. You can see how young and tender they are and terrified, and they're going into the initiation to be turned into men. They're instilled with morals, respect of elders, discipline, obedience, hard work, responsibility, group loyalty, and trust, a big one. There's no emphasis on warfare in these initiations.

The outcome, you can see the transformation. They believe that these men are married to a spirit woman who can transform them into strong, healthy men. If they go astray and have relations with human women, she will sanction them, and they will not be transformed. That's a way of keeping them in line, but you can see the difference here.

Initiations appear to be deep in our evolutionary history. You have indications of it at Lascaux Chauvet and many of the cave paintings. Then in midlife, clan membership or tribe membership, it gives access to land and assistance in many activities: gardening, tree felling, house construction, bridge-building, all of these things. Clan or tribal membership is people feel obliged to help their fellow members.

Then they have big wealth distributions. In New Guinea, people are famous for giving away many pigs. The top picture is this distribution of pearl shells, and the bottom picture is a distribution of pigs. This wealth is circulated for bride wealth, for child growth payments, compensation for injury, competitive exchanges, funeral fees, peacemaking, and again, the whole clan or tribe comes together.

Communication with the ancestors is essential. There are regular rituals to reaffirm identity, history, loyalty through rituals for the ancestors that bring people from all over and involve extensive feasting and eating together.

Now, here's something that's not normally discussed, but it's very important, is norm enforcement because how does one enforce norms while preserving clan unity? People are punished. It alienates, damages reputation, generates grudges and revenge. So in

many tribes, they have forms of restorative justice in which compensation makes up for damage done, and heals community, and brings the offender back into the fold. Because they really cannot afford to alienate active young men or women who are potentially productive. The extreme deviants have to be dealt with by the family. Often they're hamstrung, so they can't run around and make trouble.

The Enga in New Guinea now has legal plurality with customary courts that solve 90% of the disputes. When a man has to pay or a woman has to pay compensation, everyone comes together to help, to pay the amount for reasons of kinship, peace, they value the person, to show their leadership or personal reasons. We have a thousand cases now of restorative justice that we've recorded, and this is just one example.

In 2016, one clan member committed a grizzly murder, and there were 25 contributors who came and gave about 6,000 U.S. dollars and 27 pigs. So this gives you an idea of what security clan membership provides. If he kept doing this, then people wouldn't help him anymore.

Then, of course, there's warfare. Warfare is very important also, and warfare goes up and down. Enga say our land is green and black. Green when there's no warfare, and black when we're fighting. There are long periods without, and then fights come up again. It's a clan responsibility. It activates very, very strong emotionally-charged bonds of brotherhood.

The Enga wars were largely between neighbors to reestablish balance of power. It's so interesting that this can occur between neighbors, people you know, people you marry, people you go to church with or school with. I thoroughly documented one war before the high-powered weapons were introduced. It's not possible anymore.

But the night before, they have rallies to turn the neighbors of another tribe into enemies overnight, and they sing songs like, "Your girls are not like our girls. Their skin were like crocodile skins, have thorns embedded in them. Our boys are afraid to touch the skins of your sisters or daughter. You yourself can pay bride wealth to marry your own girls," implying incest, or, "You are descendants of a black-butted python. Return to your houses in the mountains, and look for the excreta of rats, pigs, and marsupials to eat." They sing, and they dance, and they do this, and they taunt the whole night. The next day, they're able to go out and fight and even kill people who they know quite well.

Then you have peacemaking, which is also a clan enterprise. Usually, after two or four deaths in the past, peace was called, war reparations were for paid for death and destruction. All families contributed. Food sharing with the neighboring clan with them when they were fighting rehumanizes the enemy. It reopens marriage, and then the balance of power and exchange ties are renewed. You can see in the picture here of the man with the pork, the enthusiasm with which people are giving as a group to restore ties.

Humans have two social strategies. One are corporate groups strategies, clans, tribes, cooperate as a united group, what I've described up to now. But they also have network strategies in which individuals form networks of mutual support with others outside the group, usually through marriage ties. It opens boundaries, creates strong ties of social support, and is the basis for vast networks of exchange. The Enga had networks of exchange involving 250 clans or tribes and 40,000 people, and the wealth would move from one to the other.

But the best evidence for against pure xenophobia and closed boundaries is multilingualism. In Oceania, Africa, South America, most people in tribal groupings can speak two to four languages. In some countries, they speak five to nine because the mothers can speak one and the grandmothers another, and because they're trading with people. So these tribes are not closed. Interactions with others is very important.

Now, I'll just talk for a minute ... there's no timer here, so I don't know where I am ... but on transforming tribalism. With increasing social complexity, old tribes break down, and new tribes or ethnicity are formed out of the exercise of power. In Enga, where I work, missions have abolished many tribal traditions, and so new tribes develop. Some of them are religious denominations. They're peaceful but competitive. They're united by church activities, schools, and health facilities.

Another form of tribes are the youths versus the elders. With the introduction of firearms, teams of mercenaries and young fighters have taken control because the elders no longer have control, and they fight for payment for their own interest and death and destruction of sword. One old peacemaker said that they came up to him with a gun and said, "Old man, your time has come and gone."

Okay. Then we have political tribes forming like in this country. The winner takes it all. He gives most of his benefits to supporters. Here, when you begin to have broader politics, moral issues enter as texting and Facebook are used to promote or demote

candidates. With modern technology, candidates are no longer vetted by face-to-face communication, and fake news is flourishing. You can see the energy in this.

I'm almost done here. Okay. You have three months of ecstatic campaigning, and votes are purchased. There's strong tribal or political loyalties with no element of social security, frequent violence, new factions in society. In summary, tribes are based on evolved psychological dispositions and cultural constructions. That's the first point I wanted to make. I'm running out of time.

The second is in small-scale societies. Tribes cover needs from birth to death. Sentiments of tribal unity begin in childhood and are constantly reinforced through ceremony, defense, festivals. Individuals have broad networks outside the tribe. Hostility can be activated and deactivated overnight. And with technology, in-group dispositions are expanded to fashion, as in our country, large pseudo-tribes tied to moral values in the exercise of power.

Tribalism, it's not driven by instincts out of the past. Culture's in the driver's seat and can leverage sentiments for better or for worse. Thank you.

[applause]

**HOST:** Thanks to Polly Wiessner for sharing her research.

This talk was part of a Leakey Foundation Survival symposium called “Our Tribal Nature: Tribalism, Politics, and Evolution.” Videos of the seven talks presented at the symposium will be out soon on [YouTube](#) and on our [website](#).

The Leakey Foundation’s spring lecture series starts in March. We’ll have two talks at the Houston Museum of Natural Science - March 23 - Geeks, Genes, and the Evolution of Asperger Syndrome with Dr. Dean Falk. And then on March 24, Dr. Falk will present - Brain Evolution from Lucy to Einstein. She’s one of the few scientists who has studied Einstein’s actual brain. Both talks will be fascinating so don’t miss them!

Then we’ll be in New York on April 1 with Dr. Alexandra Rosati discussing the Evolution of the Human Mind at the American Museum of Natural History. This talk is free. I’ll be there and I’m really looking forward to it.

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This episode was produced by me. Our lecture series is produced by Arielle Johnson. Our theme music is by Henry Nagle. Additional music in this episode comes from Lee Rosevere.

We'll be back next month with a brand new episode.

Thanks for listening.