

# Mentalities Shaped by Geography: How Diverse Environments Influence Narrative Traditions

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## Abstract

The article explores the evolution of human mentalities through storytelling, tracing a shift in narrative focus from survival-oriented nomadic societies to settled agricultural communities. The author argues that this shift, around 11,000 BCE, led to a transformation in storytelling values, emphasizing personal desire and the institution of marriage over communal survival. Drawing on examples from various cultures, the paper examines how geographic factors influenced storytelling, culminating in the celebration of heroes and the preservation of domestic spheres in river valley civilizations. The author further explores the reorientation of storytelling in island cultures, emphasizing the purity of place over racial purity. The article concludes with a reflection on modern storytelling, linking it to the persistence of racist mentalities and the shaping of narratives around borders and racial boundaries.

## Keywords

storytelling evolution, cultural values, geographic influence, river valley epics, island culture, race, contemporary narratives

## Introduction

It has been widely published that humans' mentalities are characterized by our penchant to tell stories, that we think in stories, that we are “biologically wired for story,” that we relate to one another through storytelling, and even further that it is our capacity to tell stories that actually defines us as human beings (Cron, 2012; Gottschall, 2013; Stoll, 2020). Stories play multiple roles in our lives ranging from casual reports of how we are doing, to

more formal news reports, to the preservation of our past (history), our values (morals and ethics), and even to rehearsals for how to meet future challenges (Gottschall argues that our dreams are just this, narrative rehearsals for future challenges, exchanges, encounters, or even life-threatening situations).

As far back as the earliest epics, we find a constant preoccupation with love as being primary among our emotions even when fright and flight may have been most essential to our survival. Often counterposed to love were the demands of the community, which were much more in tune with the immediate needs of protection, safety, health, and continuity of the group. Most often, in early stories, we see the necessary sacrifice of personal desire for the more pressing needs of survival. In this paper, I will argue that a shift occurred in human development at approximately 11,000 BCE (Diamond, 1977) when humans settled and began sedentary lifestyles as farmers and ranchers. In narratives typical of river valleys where the first farming began, we see the rise of stories that actually celebrate personal desire and the institution of marriage as being of equal or greater importance than the survival of the community. The shift in the relative importance of desire is, I argue, ultimately linked to the production of food as it is determined by geography.

## Method

The methods employed in this study involves a multifaceted analysis of cultural narratives and their evolution, focusing on the impact of geographical factors on storytelling practices. Drawing on insights from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, literature, and history, the research examines the transition from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles around 11,000 BCE and its influence on narrative themes. Additionally, the study delves into the work of scholars like David Turner (1985) and Jared Diamond (1977), utilizing their perspectives on Aboriginal storytelling and the challenges faced by early farming societies and incorporates findings from my book „Setting a Plot” (Spars, 2018). The comparative analysis of river valley civilizations and island cultures serves as a framework to explore how geography shapes values, heroism, and societal structures in storytelling.

## Storytelling

Of course, it is impossible to know precisely what kinds of stories were told by nomadic hunting/gathering societies that followed herds of animals twenty thousand years ago, and so, in order to reconstruct this shift, I follow the work of David Turner (1985) on Aboriginal storytelling, who relates the challenges of survival in small hunter/gathering communities to the necessity for the exchange of people between groups. Turner argues that members of small groups were necessarily traded with other hunter/gatherer groups in order to promote biodiversity within the group, which was constantly at risk of becoming inbred, and to strategically gain access to hunting/gathering territory which was transmitted with the individuals when they were exchanged. Turner's title "Life Before Genesis" is a reference to nomadic life before farming, which, from the perspective of early farming communities remained an irretrievable Edenic way of life, something permanently lost but eternally yearned for just as the Israelites would mourn the expulsion of humans from life in close proximity to God in the Garden of Eden. Jared Diamond (1977), too, has pointed out that early farming societies had to work longer days, were malnourished, and often suffered from the diseases that they shared with their domesticated animals.

It is not necessary to see the early agricultural societies as more advanced or more sophisticated than those societies that continued hunting/gathering as a way of life. In many

cases, hunter/gatherers were exposed to farming communities and deliberately chose their migratory lifestyles rather than becoming mired in one place. Both Jared Diamond (1977) and Tony Swain (1993) have written about some Aboriginal groups on the North Coast of Australia actually settling, farming, and then abandoning this more labor intensive and less healthy lifestyle for their traditional nomadic existences. Joseph Bruchac (2003), a storyteller and author, has often written and spoken about the misconception that sedentary life was more advanced than the nomadic lifestyle, or that history necessarily proceeded from nomadic hunting/gathering to sedentary farming. In my own work, I have traced how a sedentary lifestyle was a direct response to life in a certain kind of geography, which was not feasible in the deserts of Central Australia. When European ranchers did arrive in Australia and began to produce food that they were accustomed to, the environment quickly degenerated and became unlivable for anyone.

To argue that the stories of the Aboriginal People, who serve as modern examples of a nomadic lifestyle, certainly have not remained static or fixed for forty thousand years since the arrival of people on the continent of Australia. Tony Swain (1993) has examined how the encounters with Europeans generated an enormous upheaval, as indigenous Australians struggled to reorient themselves against an invasive threat. *The Wawalak Sisters* (for a summary of this epic see p. 196 in my book, *Setting a Plot*) is an oral epic that spans much of the continent, and was sung as a means to unify groups that had always been separate under the aegis of an All-Mother and All-Father and to locate them vis a vis the arrival of Indonesians in the North and Europeans in the South (Swain, 1993; Spars, 2018). In *Setting a Plot* I treat less expansive and universal Songlines as expressions of group ethics that were necessary prior to the immediate threat of incarceration and genocide the indigenous people faced, which was similar to the fates of Native American people especially during the eighteenth century. Prior to reservations, the deliberate poisoning of water holes, the spread of smallpox and other diseases, the stories of nomadic people among many things celebrated motion and movement. *The Lizard Man* epic is no exception (Spars, 2018).

In the plot (for a summary of this Songline epic see page 106-107 in Bruce Chatwin's book *The Songlines*), Lizard Man sends Lizard Woman to the Southern People to obtain fire (Chatwin, 1987). However, the Southerners do not allow her to return, and, in her place, send one of their women with a pot of fire. Lizard Man, who was extremely fond of his companion, is enraged, stomping his feet and howling in anger. Chatwin observes that Lizard Woman is in many ways the Songline version of Helen of Troy, who was abducted by Paris, thereby enraging Menelaus, King of Sparta and Helen's husband. The similarity, however, ends there. Our Lizard version of Menelaus, while heartbroken, jilted, and ashamed, does not go to battle against the Southerners. Instead, he withdraws from the conflict and returns the way he came with his new companion, the Southern Woman. The arrival back at his point of emergence from the ground would find him much the same as at the beginning of the narrative, but for one difference. On the way home, he and Southern Woman devour several dingo pups that Lizard Man had noticed in the distance on his departing journey. While no reasons are made explicit for his decision to eat the dogs on his return, the boldness to leave his track and capture the puppies may be indicative of an important advantage that he had gained through his new alliance with the Southern woman – access to hunting/gathering territory he previously did not have when he set forth with Lizard Woman, whose access to land was identical to his own.

Lizard Man's broken-hearted outrage followed by his reluctant acceptance of Southern Woman places two human and societal values in tension with one another, ultimately resolving them in favor of the necessity for the exchange of people. Underlying the exchange is Lizard Man's resolve to have children with a woman who is not related to him, thereby increasing the chances of healthier offspring who do not suffer from diseases transmitted by recessive genes, but also the strategic collection of visas to new territories that are transmitted with the person of Southern Woman herself. The love and affection that Lizard Man felt for Lizard

Woman becomes suppressed in favor of the health of the group, access to new territory, and the resulting ability to thrive.

Sedentary life and food surpluses resulted in specialization – the departure down the path toward technological advancement traced in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, especially the rise of larger populations, which, as Diamond (1977) argues, was one of the simplest means that farming communities were eventually able to overwhelm sparsely populated areas inhabited by hunter/gatherers. Stories like *Lizard Man* that may have once been told by those who were either cast from the Edenic life of nomadism or chose to adopt sedentary lifestyles, I argue, were transmuted to reflect the changes in values that village and city life required. Of course, militarism, bravery, and feats of physical prowess and strength are celebrated, but for the present purposes of this paper, I will simply focus on the change of importance that is afforded to personal desire. We can simply look at the different response made by Menelaus from that of Lizard Man, whose similar positions were observed by Bruce Chatwin (1987), to advance our discussion without delving too deeply into other narratives that would have served this purpose, such as *The Ramayana* (ca. 800–300 B.C.E./2004), the story of Dinah in *Genesis* (*New American Bible*, 2002), or any of a number of stories about Chinese Princesses that were abducted by nomadic groups such as the Huns or Mongols (*Cai Wenji* is a classic example).

That Helen's face could launch a thousand ships has always been treated as a more poetic and literary motivation for a ten-year war that may have actually been about control of the trade route to the Black Sea. The parallel plot with national epics from other river valley civilizations such as *The Ramayana* (ca. 800–300 B.C.E./2004) of India, in which Rama wages a war against Ravana, King of Sri Lanka, who has abducted his wife, Sita, however, invites us to look beneath the simple exaltation of either Helen or Sita as being prizes worth going to war over, at the interplay between the values that are pitted against each other just as we did with *Lizard Man*. We might simply say that in the river valleys of Greece and India (and China and the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, which share similar narratives) that a husband's love for his wife, and, in turn, his pride and honor, are values of the highest order that even trump the value of the lives of the thousands who die in the respective wars. However, that is not quite the case.

The coldness between Menelaus and Helen when Telemachus visits Sparta years after the Trojan War (and in turn Rama's seemingly heartless rejection of Sita after he has defeated Ravana) are indicative that something more than mere personal desire is being exalted when the Achaeans (and the Ikshvakus) are willing to risk everything to bring back Helen (and Sita). In Rama's case, when he is reunited with Sita, he tells her she is no longer fit to be his queen since she has been in the house of another man. In Helen's, Telemachus catches her on the stairs, distant, spurned, and repudiated by Menelaus and all of Greece, having been blamed for the loss of thousands of heroes' lives. The recovery of these iconic women (Helen and Sita) and their restoration to their original positions at the side of their husbands does not, therefore, seem to be the result.

The dramatic expansion of the integrity of one household, that of Menelaus or Rama respectively, to the honor and sovereignty of all the Achaeans or all the Ikshvakus, one of the most puzzling aspects of both epics when we consider that it is the reversal of any utilitarian consideration of either situation, contains the roots of what I believe to be, ultimately, what emerges as the highest value, and that is the preservation of the integrity of the domestic spheres of the home, the village, the city-state, the kingdom, and the country. The excessive outpouring of violence to bring back one person who has been abducted might be interpreted as a dramatic rejection of the earlier practice in which the exchange of people was necessary. Going to war to recover one person, and thereby cease any and all exchange with other people, might be symbolic of the independence from other groups that farming communities found when they settled and embarked down Diamond's path toward larger populations and technology (Diamond, 1977). Rather than celebrating the inter-dependence of all groups with one

another as had been done in nomadic societies, the farming communities were celebrating the rise of a distinct people, separate from all others. The agriculture and animal husbandry that had led these communities into their domestic sanctuaries from the wilderness had also created spaces in which a people, even a race, was distinct from all other groups, now deemed as foreign or alien. The very desire that motivated the selection of crops that were larger and sweeter, or animals that were compatible with humans (Pollan, 2002), combined with the desire that formed the basis for the domestic sphere of the home (the selection of a desirable spouse) was also producing firm, clear, and often visual boundaries (in the form of borders or even actual walls) at every scale: the home (the permanent dwelling of a husband and wife), the city-state (the walls of Uruk in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2750–2500 B.C.E./1985)), and even the country or kingdom (think of the Great Wall of China or the Pillars of Ashoka forming visual boundaries around the respective states).

The comparison between Lizard Man and Menelaus, which forms the core of this paper, also invites us to consider another aspect of storytelling and how it is shaped by geography. Menelaus, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Achilles all form heroes of the Trojan War, to be sung about and celebrated for eternity. Heroes are common in Indian epics as well with Arjuna and Rama taking center stage of *The Mahabharata* (300 BC–400 CE/2010) and *The Ramayana* (ca. 800–300 B.C.E./2004) respectively. Indeed, quests are made, wars are won, ideals are upheld – they are models for what individuals should aspire to, and still are. Calling Lizard Man, the hero of his eponymous epic does not sit quite as easily with the western audience, especially since Lizard Man does just the opposite of what we would expect the Greek or Indian hero to do: fight a large-scale war to win back his wife. We have seen, however, that to do so in the context of a nomadic lifestyle would fly in the face of the very values that are necessary for survival in the delicate and unforgiving landscape of the desert. We might, once again, ask the question, “Did geography influence storytellers so that it was the storytellers of river valleys that created what we generally call ‘heroes,’ but not those of deserts or islands?”

A brief account of river valley history would begin with the first sedentary life in approximately 11,000 BCE as mentioned above, launching the Neolithic Era. As previously discussed, the food surpluses that the sedentary communities enjoyed as a result of storable grains (the luck of geography) allowed specialization to take place. James Frazer (1922) and Joseph Campbell (1959, 1962) have written extensively about the earliest specialist in Neolithic villages – the Neolithic King. Students often find it surprising to learn that being the king wasn’t always what it means today. In fact, being the king in Neolithic villages meant one’s days were numbered until they were sacrificed through their “Sacred Marriage” to the Goddess. In Paleolithic times, the Goddess was mother of all, which implied that humans were siblings with plants and animals. Upon the advent of farming and ranching, however, humans’ relations to their animals changed from one based on kinship to one based on domesticity. The relationship to the Goddess changed as well, from seeing her as an All-Mother to relating to her through the domestic union between her and the Neolithic king. For millennia, kings were sacrificed over and over again with the harvests and with the seasonal slaughter of animals, whereupon with the planting of the new crop and the birth of the spring lambs, a new, young and vital king was installed, only to be sacrificed once again.

The first heroes were all kings, and, as I argue in *Setting a Plot*, they were some of the earliest kings to reject the sacred marriage (Spars, 2018). The climax of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2750–2500 B.C.E./1985) features the King of Uruk’s rejection of a marriage proposal from Ishtar, the Goddess. Later heroes such as Theseus (King of Athens), Odysseus (King of Ithaca), and Rama (King of Ayodhya) all feature rejections of the Divine Feminine. *The Odyssey* may be read as a series of rejections beginning with Circe, the nymph with whom Odysseus shared a bed for a year, to Calypso, the goddess who held him prisoner for seven years, to Nausicaa, who serves as a surrogate for Athena. The puzzlingly chilling treatment of Sita by Rama after his victorious battle suddenly makes sense if we understand that these rejections

of divine women are rehearsals of Gilgamesh's original "epic no." The rejection of "the Sacred Marriage" becomes even more integral to the definition of hero, at least in the earliest stages of heroism, than "the Hero's Journey" as outlined by Campbell (1959, 1962).

Of course, it was river valley culture that was exported throughout the Pacific Ocean when in 4,000 BCE the Austronesian sailors departed from Taiwan on their outriggers laden with water (stored in Lapita pottery), pigs, and rice grains. These farmers would displace the original hunter/gatherers in the Philippines and Indonesia in 3,500 BCE and 2,500 BCE respectively. Jared Diamond (1977) argues that it was the advantages of farming (including population density and immunity to disease) that allowed the Austronesians to overwhelm all of the original inhabitants save very small and widely dispersed enclaves of people he refers to as Negritos.

Traditions and stories that were brought with these sailors undoubtedly underwent changes to suit the new demands of an island's geography. In Indonesia's preeminent indigenous epic, *The Calonarang*, we find the vestiges of the "Sacred Marriage" between the King of Daha, Airlangga, and a powerful sorceress, the Calon Arang, who serves as an example of the Divine Feminine demonized and dismissed by court power and religious authority. The Calon Arang demands that the King marry her daughter, Ratna Manggali, but the King refuses, in keeping with the river valley's heroic tradition. Whereas in river valley narratives such as *the Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2750–2500 B.C.E./1985), there is a sacrificial substitution for the king, seen in the Bull of Heaven sent by the Goddess, which Gilgamesh and Enkidu quickly and easily slay. In the island narrative, however, the rejection of marriage is replaced with a new and much more relevant problem to the island imagination. The Calon Arang unleashes a plague that pollutes the entire land, its crops, its animals, and its people. The problem of the integrity of the domestic sphere (and the idea of the purity of race) so central to the river valley storytellers is swapped out for the pressing threat to the purity of the island itself. The rice withers and rots into black cesspools; the skin on the cattle hangs from their bones; corpses of children are eaten by dogs. This horrific vision is what happens when island cultures do not serve as proper custodians of their land. In *Setting a Plot* (Spars, 2018), I argue that while sacrifice, originally in the form of the "Sacred Marriage" but then modified to include substitutions of animals (or even soldiers through warfare), serves as the central cultural practice, cleansing rituals (*selamatan*) evolved to replace these sacrifices, dedicated to the various socio-spatial spheres of self (*bersih diri*), village (*bersih desa*), island (*Panca Wali Krama*), and even world (*Eka Dasa Rudra*).

Notions of racial purity, nascent in the early river valley epics, are, therefore, reoriented to the purity of place. Another epic story titled *Sida Karya*, this one particular to Bali, relates the arrival of a haggard traveler (Ida Sangkhya) to the gates of Pura Besakih, the Mother Temple of Bali, where King Waturenggong is attending a cleansing ceremony. When the traveler demands to be allowed in, the guards drive him away, feeling certain that the ceremony is no place for a foreigner, and a beggar at that! Dewa Gunung, the God of Mount Agung, however, immediately punishes King Waturenggong and his people by unleashing demonic forces that immediately destroy the productive atmosphere of the ritual. Offerings rot before they are consecrated; dance performers argue; the temple is damaged by these polluted and corrupted forces. Once again, the threat to the integrity of the domestic sphere posed by the foreigner is replaced with a much more significant and immediate problem – the pollution and corruption of the island's limited resources. King Waturenggong, rather than fighting the demons in any heroic manner, prays to Dewa Gunung and learns the key to restoring peace and prosperity—locating Ida Sangkhya and seating this foreign man right at the center of the cleansing ritual. Rather than spurned, shunned, or driven away, foreign-ness is to be welcomed and embraced.

## Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine other kinds of geographies, their histories, and the impact this has had on the mentality of the respective peoples as storytellers. The discourse concludes by briefly alluding to modern storytelling and highlighting the persistent potential for racism within the family of nation-states comprising the world. As the current political situation in the United States and in other countries around the world, we are witnessing the persistence or even an upsurge of racist mentalities that seek to apply the concrete borders of the state to the abstract boundaries of different peoples as defined by race. The reproductive spheres of the white households, immediately following the 2020 Census in the United States, were presented as being under attack and in danger of disappearing against the growing numbers of Black and Brown households, causing Tucker Carlson, the conservative news commentator, to ask the question, “Where did all the white people go?” (Levy et al., 2021). The constant perpetuation of the narrative that the American borders are under a siege from the South reinforces the fearful mentality of white Americans that their race is being overwhelmed by the invasive “Brownness” that is flowing through a porous border. Fear of “Brownness” and “Blackness” is a story that is told constantly in the conservative media, and is at the heart of the current debate around the ultimate story in America, how U.S. History should be taught in high school, whether or not Critical Race Theory should be part of the curriculum. Interestingly, while the debate is about the boundaries between the United States and Mexico, and between white and Black or Brown, the real boundary that is emerging, perhaps bigger and more insurmountable than the American border with Mexico, is the political divide that is growing between white nationalists and the rest of American society. America finds itself more divided than it has ever been since the Civil War.

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