OF DRUMS
AND DANCERS

FROM THE AGE OF DISCOVERY through the mid-nineteenth century, explorers and ethnographers compiled an immense record of life among the "savage races." In the later part of the nineteenth century, when anthropology was slowly coming into existence as a professional and academic discipline, the European anthropologists who inherited this record began to try to interpret it and, in particular, to try to explain what seemed to them its most striking and puzzling feature: the impressive number of similarities in the customs, institutions, and collective representations of geographically separated societies.

The search for the origins of these similarities became a debate between two dominant schools of thought. The first, represented by the writings of such figures as W. H. R. Rivers and Grafton Elliot Smith, maintained that worldwide similarities of customs and beliefs were the result of historical events and, specifically, of the movements of peoples. According to these authors, cultural resemblances were the product of migration, contact, or the diffusion of institutions from a common center or core. The most influential proponents of the alternate view were Adolf Bastian and

Frontispiece. "Cimetière des sacrifices."
Edward B. Tylor, who attributed striking resemblances between cultures in different places to the shared propensities of human beings. Bastian called these universal tendencies “elementary ideas”; Tylor referred to them collectively as “the psychic unity of mankind.” Tylor, Bastian, and others who shared their views believed that cross-cultural similarities arose not from contact between different societies but from the natural tendency of human beings to think in certain ways. They tended to regard the observed differences among various cultures as relatively unimportant.

The debate has still not been settled, and it may never be—at least, not in its current form. Anthropologists have begun recently to examine their craft in light of its own history as a discipline. In doing so, they have discovered that both the pictures painted by these early travel accounts and the premises adopted by anthropologists on both sides of the debate over cultural similarities were based less on scientific objectivity than on certain prejudices that emerged from the ideology of European expansionism. Since these early explorers and anthropologists shared notions of what counted as civilized and European, it stood to reason, in their minds, that the “primitive” cultures they were encountering in diverse corners of the globe must be possessed of a set of shared non-European, or “anti-European,” characteristics. These characteristics added to “savagery,” the opposite of “civilization.”

We can begin to understand why it now seems that these cultural similarities were to a great extent the product of the European imagination by examining a series of illustrations drawn from different travel accounts. These illustrations resemble one another both in subject matter and in formal iconography. The earliest in this series, “Reception Given by the King of Hoorn Island” (figure 1), was created by the Flemish engraver Theodor de Bry for “Voyages in the South Seas,” an account of the history of Dutch navigations in those waters. This account was included in the eleventh volume of Great Voyages, a 13-volume series edited by de Bry and his two sons, Johan Israel and Johan Theodor, and published in Frankfurt between 1590 and 1634. Great Voyages was the first comprehensive printed and engraved travel account and the first attempt to provide Europeans with a pictorial image of the New World. De Bry and his sons were not ethnographers, however, and they took on the project as a means of demonstrating their artistic skills. “Reception Given by the King of Hoorn Island” laid the groundwork for what would become a standard formula in the pictorial representation of non-Western peoples. The content and layout of the illustration—the circle of dancers, the drummers off to one side, and the
procession of individuals marching in a curved line through the background of the tableau—would appear over and over again in the iconographic representation of non-Europeans in the illustrated travel account.

Over 100 years after the publication of "Voyages in the South Seas," Bernard Picart's engraving of 1722, "Rejouissances des Mexicains, au commencement du siècle" ["Mexican Merry-Making, at the Beginning of the Century"] (figure 2) for the seventh volume of J. F. Bernard's encyclopedic study of world religions, Cérémonies et costumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde [Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the People of the World] (Paris, 1735), almost precisely reproduces the layout of de Bry's "Hoorn Island" engraving. In both, a drummer kneels at the far right of the tableau; a group of dancers forms a circle in the center of the scene; and a figure with an extended arm enters from the left. Though Picart's figures are full-sized, in contrast to the punti-like figures in de Bry's illustration, one notices nonetheless two little figures at the extreme left of Picart's engraving which bear striking resemblance to the two figures holding hands at the bottom of the circle of dancers in de Bry's illustration.

Nearly 50 years after Picart's illustration appeared, Bernard Direxit's drawing of a Mexican scene, titled "Amusemens de l'empereur après son diner" ["The Emperor's Entertainment After Dinner"] (figure 3) was published in 1780 in the eleventh volume of Jean François de La Harpe's compendium of travel literature, Abrégé de l'histoire générale des voyages [A Short Summary of the General History of Voyages]. The affinities with both the Picart and the de Bry engravings are striking. In the "Amusemens" we find, once again, a kneeling drummer at the bottom right of the illustration; dancers (many in postures identical to those in the Picart and de Bry engravings) centrally placed in the composition; and two figures entering the scene from the left, one with his arm extended.

At the close of the eighteenth century, the illustrator of Archibald Dalziel's chronicle of the West African Kingdom of Dahomey, The History of Dahomy [sic] (London, 1793), engraved a plate entitled "Victims for Sacrifice" (figure 4). Once more one finds drums and dancing figures. The drummers now appear on the left of the illustration; a figure with an outstretched arm emerges from the right; and a circle of dancers with upraised arms is depicted in the center of the composition. When comparing the image to de Bry's 1619 en-
of Dahomey, the representation of “primitive” non-Europeans was based less on direct observation than on a set of formal iconographic conventions. Again and again, the “otherness” of the non-European is signaled by the presence of drums and dancers depicted in conventional poses. Frolic and merriment—often accompanied by torture and cruelty—are stamped by the Western illustrator as features of the “savagery” and “barbarism” of the Other.

As a narrative genre, travel literature can be traced back at least to the writings of Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. His Histories represent one of the first serious attempts at ethnological writing and the description of diverse cultures. Herodotus accompanied trading expeditions, journeying as far east as Persia and as far west as Italy. He recorded his observations carefully, duly noting variations in taste, social custom, climate, and diet. As the genre continued into the Middle Ages, travel accounts began to draw more upon fantastic legends than upon actual observations. “Having lost touch with the classics,” Margaret Hodgen writes, “medieval scholarship surveyed a preposterous and fabulous sediment of what had once been a comparatively realistic antique

**Figure 5.** “The Culembage of the Negroes.”

Phillips’s A Collection of Modern and Contemporary Voyages and Travels (London, 1806), included an engraving titled “The Culembage of the Negroes” (figure 5). Again there is a circle of dancers with upraised arms in the center of the illustration. The drummers are off to the right of the scene, and a kneeling figure with an extended arm has been placed in the lower right-hand corner. The engraving bears a striking resemblance to Direxit’s “Amusements” (figure 3). Compare particularly the instrument in the hand of the dancer at the far left of Direxit’s illustration to the objects in the hands of the dancers in the “Culembage”; and the head ornament on the seated figure at the bottom right of the “Culembage” to the curved headdress on the dancing figure just left of center in the “Amusements.”

**Figure 6.** Uncaptioned engraving from Les Missions Catholiques.

Finally, in 1878 (shortly before photography would largely replace engraving in the illustration of travel accounts) one M. Bertrand depicted a scene of dancing and torture for the French journal Les Missions Catholiques (figure 6). Though the cluster of dancers has been moved to the far left, and the king of Hoorn Island (from de Bry’s 1619 engraving) has been replaced by a prisoner nailed to a stump, the formal similarities link de Bry’s illustration to Bertrand’s in convincing fashion. This series of illustrations suggests that during the 250 years separating de Bry’s engraving of drums and dancers in the South Fiji Basin from Bertrand’s scene of dance and torture in the coastal West African Kingdom
ethnography. Rather than carefully observe nearby European “barbarians” or “savages” (as Herodotus had done in ancient Greece), medieval copyists and epito-
mizers dwelt upon the savagery of antiquity, focusing
particularly on occasional remarks in the classics
concerning the putative existence of strange creatures,
dragons, giants, and numerous types of anthropomor-
phic chimera. These writers attempted to describe
places they knew virtually nothing about, and the result
was that they populated the world with creatures of
their imagination.

With the discovery of the New World in the fifteenth
century, and the many subsequent voyages of far-flung
exploration, Europeans began to expand their cultural
and geographic horizons. Descriptions of distant lands
and peoples were increasingly based on firsthand obser-
vation rather than on imagination or the distortion of
classic sources. In this context, the illustrated travel
account came into being. According to Barbara Stafford,
the “stated objective of the creators of the ‘factual’ travel
account was communication (through consummate
description) of the things [and people] of the world.”
In 1771, Abraham Rees wrote that “Voyages and Travels
are a species of instruction which is generally acceptable
and amusing; they gratify that love of novelty and
variety, which is natural to the human mind.”

Europeans might be instructed by the illustrated travel
account in one of two ways: by example and by counterexample. During the Enlightenment, cultural
differences were thought to be the source of lessons that
might guide European behavior. Voltaire, for example,
admonished explorers and travelers to be “busied chiefly
in giving faithful Accounts of all the useful Things and
of the extraordinary Persons, whom to know, and to
imitate, would be a Benefit to our Countrymen.” In a
similar vein, in his Essays to Direct and Extend the Inquir-
ies of Patriotic Travellers, Count Berchthold suggested in
1789 that the patriotic traveler look upon his own coun-
try “as a sick friend, for whose relief he asks advice of
the world.” More typically, the travel account educated
by counterexample. Differences between Europeans
and non-Europeans were rendered in a way that would
instruct Europeans on how not to act. In place of an
objective knowledge of different cultures, the travel ac-
tool constructed an image of non-Europeans that was
founded on stereotyped contrast: the “primitive” repre-
sented everything the West hoped it was not. By con-
trasting itself to what it was not, the West’s image of
non-Western cultures was one through which the West
could define itself. In the words of Stanley Diamond,
“Western culture can only conceive of itself critically
with reference to fictions of the Primitive.” The stere-
oretypical representations of non-Europeans as “savage”
and “barbarian” would help shape European reactions to
non-Europeans and, in the end, would serve to legit-
imize conquest, slavery, and colonialism on the part of
the Europeans. 

Although the fifteenth century
heralded a new era in Europe’s knowl-
edge of the rest of the world, “fictions of the primitive”
nevertheless persisted in accounts of voyages and trav-
els. A pair of examples will illustrate just how “fiction-
ral” representations of the “primitive” could be. In 1634
Fortunio Lisetti published his De Monstrum, a “scientific”
study of the monstrous races of mankind, in which
appeared an illustration by Ambroise Paré of the
“Elephant-headed Man” (figure 7). Twenty years later,
and nearly two centuries after Columbus’s exploration
of the New World, John Bulwer’s Anthropometamor-
phos.
s presented a depiction of the so-called “Hirsute Aborigine” (figure 8), a native of the “Hairy Nation” described in Pliny the Elder’s Historia naturalis.

Some of these fictions, however, are difficult to detect; they arise from certain practical considerations. Illustrations were important to travel accounts, in part because they added a very powerful element of realism to the description of distant peoples and lands. Particularly after the introduction of copper-plate intaglio engraving by the de Bry family, the illustrations in accounts of voyages and travels served to make the image of non-Western peoples more tangible, lifelike, and realistic. Edward Hodnett has noted that “the text frequently does not describe in full detail the scene chosen, may not really describe it at all, and literally cannot match a picture in concreteness.” But, unlike authors of travel accounts, engravers generally had no firsthand knowledge of the “primitive” peoples they were to illustrate. They were forced to create an impression of realism with scant knowledge of the reality they had to depict.

Working with few facts, European artists needed to find a pictorial method that would distinguish non-Europeans from Europeans and create for their European audiences a sense of the “otherness” of non-Europeans. At the same time, they had to convince readers that the illustrations were truthful renderings of the scenes described in the text. Bound by these constraints, illustrators resorted to conventional canons of composition to signal that their illustrations represented something or someone non-European. The increasing popularity of the illustrated travel account engendered a body of conventional criteria that effectively created the very standards by which the subject of a picture could be identified—and verified—as “primitive.”

Illustrators were able to use conventionalized images without sacrificing a sense of realism because few of their readers had seen the places and peoples described in the text. Given this ignorance on the part of readers, the caption that accompanied the picture assumed a special importance. As E. H. Gombrich has argued in his book Art and Vision: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation, the caption effectively determines the truth of a picture. The reader compares the caption to the image and either agrees or disagrees with the veracity of the label. During the Age of Discovery, the public had few opportunities to check the truthfulness of captions. “How many people,” Gombrich asks, “ever saw their ruler in the flesh at sufficiently close quarters to recognize his likeness? How many traveled widely enough to tell one city from another?” Captions and pictures were matched and rematched with sovereign disregard for truth. “The print sold on the market as a portrait of a king,” writes Gombrich, “would be altered to represent his successor or enemy.”

In the illustrated travel account, such “indifference to truthful captions” was wedded to the use of conventional images. Gombrich locates an example of this phenomenon in Michael Wölgemut’s woodcuts for Hartmann Schedel’s Nuremberg Chronicle (1493), one of the first illustrated accounts of the manners and customs of people from around the world. Gombrich writes:

What an opportunity such a volume should give the historian to see what the world was like at the time of Columbus! But as we turn the pages of this big folio, we find the same woodcut of a medieval city recurring with different captions as Damascus, Ferrara, Milan, and Mantua. Unless we are prepared to believe these cities were as indistinguishable from one another as their suburbs may be today, we must conclude that neither the publisher nor the public minded whether the captions told the truth. All they were expected to do was to bring home to the reader that these names stood for cities.

The analogy between the cities of the Nuremberg Chronicle and the scenes depicted in the drums and dancers series is compelling. The stereotyped and conventionalized illustrations from the Nuremberg Chronicle signal to the reader that places like Damascus and Milan are “cities,” while at the same time granting the reader the illusion of seeing each city in its uniqueness. In a similar manner, the standardized pattern evident in the drums and dancers sequence establishes for readers the notion that what is depicted is indeed non-European, “savage,” and “other,” and at the same time lets the reader feel that each locale—Fijian, Mexican, West African—has been uniquely captured. The price illustrators must pay to create such standardized conventions is indifference to local detail. But the authority and veracity inherent in the very conventions so established yield, by a curious and ironic twist, a substantial return: tipped off by a caption, the reader is more likely to believe that the unique, local identity of the scene has
been portrayed with fidelity not to convention but to reality itself.

Illustrators occasionally looked back to older artistic conventions when attempting to create a new set of conventions for the depiction of the non-European. As Bernadette Bucher has argued, problems surrounding the depiction of nudity among the native peoples of the New World led illustrators to classical models. In writing, non-Europeans could be defined through negation: Indians or Africans could be described simply by naming the elements from European culture that they lacked. As Bucher has noted, an author needed merely to assert that some feature was missing, as for example in Montaigne's remark, "Eh, quoi, ils ne portent pas de hauts de chaussé!" ["What! They're not wearing breeches!"] In figurative drawing, however, description by mere negation is impossible. One cannot illustrate something graphically by indicating that it is not there. According to Bucher, one result of this limitation imposed by the artistic medium itself was "a radical transformation in the vision of the New World especially where Indian nudity was concerned." Because artists could not portray nudity as the absence of clothing, "the engravers had no choice but to use the forms canonized in art: bodies of Roman or Greek statues and Italian virgins . . . "

A good example of the use of this convention can be found in de Bry's depictions of the Indians of Virginia in the Great Voyages. There is a series of plates (figure 9) that show front and back views of male and female figures standing on a precipice overlooking nondescript landscape backgrounds. The figures are adorned in various styles of clothing, and carry different sorts of objects, including bows and arrows and gourd containers. The depiction of the bodies is clearly based on a classical model.

Indeed, classical models provided the inspiration for two different conventions, which Rüdiger Joppinen and Bernard Smith have called the allegoric convention and the ethnographic convention.20

The allegoric convention denotes the personification of places. It is a representational convention that can be found, for instance, in the Greek statue of Tyche of Antioch, which personifies Antioch as a young woman seated like the city itself above the river Orontes. The allegorical style finds its way into travel accounts in the form of title pages, frontispieces, and finish pages. Each continent had its own allegorical device; in de Bry's engravings, for example, the New World was rendered as an armadillo and also as a female figure with feathered headdress, a bow, and arrows. One of the most stunning examples of the allegorical convention in travel literature is William Blake's engraving of "Europe Supported by Africa and America" (figure 10), which was commissioned by Captain J. G. Stedman for his Narrative, of a five years' expedition, against the revolted Negroes of Surinam, published in London in 1796.

The allegoric convention was a useful way for an illustrator to create an impression of "otherness" as soon as the reader opened the book; within the text itself, the
representation of non-Europeans was generally governed by the ethnographic convention. In this convention, the presence of the Other is signaled not by foreign landscapes or physiognomic differences but rather by peculiarities of dress and adornment. The background is usually a rudimentary landscape setting; the figures are drawn in classical style; and the cultural context of these figures is identified only by the exotic nature of their clothing and the foreign-looking objects that they hold. One example of the use of the ethnographic convention can be found in early European representations of American Indians. In one of the earliest known illustrations of New World Indians, a woodcut issued in Augsburg around 1500 (figure 11), some Tupinamba Indians of Brazil are depicted wearing feathered skirts, anklets, bracelets, necklaces, and headresses. Except for their exotic adornment and the bows and arrows that they hold, the figures look European—their bodies are white, their faces Caucasian, and some of the men have thick beards. In other illustrations, the feathered headdress or crown worn by the subject is the only feature that distinguishes the non-European from the European.

In the nineteenth century, illustrators were less likely to render figures in a neoclassical style, attending instead to physiognomic differences. Thus the Wolof warrior depicted in the engraving “Mari de la Reine du

Walo, Wolof” (“Husband of the Queen of Walo, Wolof”) (figure 12) in l’Abbé David Boilat’s *Esquisse sénégalaises* (Senegalese Sketches) (Paris, 1853) appears to be African. All that remains here of the ethnographic convention is the use of a generically neutral background.

In many cases, the lack of firsthand knowledge of a given “primitive” culture led illustrators beyond the use of formal conventions to the actual borrowing of images from depictions of a different “primitive” culture. In most cases, the models they chose were earlier depictions of the same cultural group or geographic region being described. For instance, when Father Joseph François Lafitau commissioned engravings for his encyclopedic study of Ameri-

Figure 12. “Mari de la Reine du Walo, Wolof.”
can Indians, Moeurs des sauvages américains, comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps [Customs of the American Savages, Compared to the Customs of Earlier Times] (Paris, 1724), he instructed his illustrators to base certain depictions on earlier engravings drawn by de Bry, some of which were themselves modeled on earlier illustrations such as the watercolors of Jacques le Moyne de Morgue and John White.24

Sometimes, however, engravers used as models illustrations from entirely distinct cultures.25 Because these types of models are almost never acknowledged in the sources, they are especially difficult to trace. One clear example of such borrowing appears in two illustrations published about seven years apart in French travel accounts of the early eighteenth century. The first illustration is an engraving by Jean Baptiste Labat titled “Cérémonie de la circoncision des nègres” (“Ceremony of the Circumcision of Negroes”) (figure 13), from the second volume of the Nouvelle relation de l'Afrique Occidentale [A New Account of West Africa] (Paris, 1728). The plate depicts a scene from Guinea, West Africa, in which a group of young men march in procession to begin a ritual of circumcision. The procession is a common motif in such illustrations. Labat’s procession bears an unusual degree of resemblance to the line of people in the background of de Bry’s “Reception Given by the King of Hoorn Island” (figure 1), and also shows noteworthy parallels to the line of figures making offerings in the “Réjouissances des Mexicains, au commencement du siècle” (figure 2).

What is most interesting, however, is that Labat’s illustration probably served as a model for an engraving by Bernard Picart titled “L’incas vient recevoir les ofrandes que ses sujets font au soleil” (“The Incas come to receive offerings made by their subjects to the sun”) (figure 14) that appeared in the seventh volume of Bernard’s Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses. Picart’s illustration shows a scene from Peru in which a procession of people are marching with offerings toward their king. In a comparison of these two illustrations, one ought especially to note the similarities in the movement of the procession, the posture of the seated figure in the middle of both scenes, the vertical position of the spears being carried by some of the marchers, and the conical roofs on the buildings that are located in the upper left-hand corner of both engravings.

It is likely that such borrowing was practiced not only by the illustrators but also by the authors of travel accounts. I have recently uncovered what appears to be a set of borrowed elements, both textual and graphic, from accounts written about very different parts of the world. It involves the relationship between descriptions of human sacrifice among the ancient Aztecs of Mexico and the Dahomeans of West Africa.

In both the Mexico of the Aztecs and in Dahomey, Europeans set out to conquer new territory and to dominate a people, economically as well as politically. In Dahomey, Europeans sought specifically to capture
human chattel for sale in the Atlantic trade. The early European textual and iconographic representations of
the native peoples of the two regions are remarkable not so much for the thoroughgoing copying and plagiarism
of particulars but rather for a kind of shared preoccupation, a thematic focus that was to become a leitmotif in
the representations of the two peoples. In both contexts, authors and illustrators dwelt on a complex of
related themes: the prominent display of human skulls; the idea of “temples” as the location of these displays;
and, finally, human sacrifice as the practice that lay behind such brutish displays. The textual representations
of this set of themes are marked alike for the two regions. But because we do not have a solid ethnographic
and historical foundation against which we might check the veracity of these accounts, it is difficult to tell
to what extent the likenesses between the accounts are due to a common preoccupation with sets of facts that
were indeed similar in the two locations, and to what extent the similarities are artifacts generated (through
copying or borrowing) by the common preoccupation. Some examples incline us in one direction, others in the
opposite direction. In the case of pictorial representations, however, we have reason to conclude that there
was in fact some grafting of Aztec facts onto Dahomey engravings.

The Aztec display of skulls was the subject of much lurid commentary by Cortés and his contemporaries.
Antonio de Herrera wrote about the plaza in which sacrifice took place that “the steps that led to the top were
made of stone, but they were interlaced with human skulls which bared their teeth.” Andrés de Tapia, one
of Cortés’s soldiers, described the skull rack, or tzompantli: “Lining the platform steps were many skulls set
in mortar, with the teeth bared. At each end of the row of beams was a tower made of mortar and skulls with
teeth bared.” Elsewhere it was reported that in the plaza where sacrifice took place “there were piles of human
skulls so regularly arranged that one could count them.”

Dalzel’s description of the entrance to the “sacrificial grounds” of the Dahomeans, in his History of Dahomey,
closely echoes the Aztec accounts: “there was a small area . . . formed of a wall about three feet high, the top
of which was stuck full of human jaw-bones; and the path leading to the door was paved with human
skulls.” Similarly, in A Voyage to Africa (London,
1820), John McLeod wrote that the passage to the sacrificial altar was “paved with human skulls” and “the top
of the wall which surrounded this detached apartment was adorned with their jaw-bones.”

The link between these two sets of descriptions seems at first to be tenuous, since the facts may indeed have
been similar. But when we turn to the question of “temples” in these settings, the link becomes more direct. De
Herrera’s description of the Aztec “cimetière des sacrifices” was published in French translation in 1780. In
that report, de Herrera wrote: “Human victims were sacrificed in the large Temple. The heads were kept
either as trophies to honor the victor or as symbols of death. This horrible site was located in front of the
main entrance to the Temple.” Forty years later, the French compendium Choix de Voyages [A Selection of
Voyages] published an account of Dahomey, in which the author reported: “The Dahomeans are ferocious be-
yond belief. Human skulls are the principal ornaments of their palaces and temples.” The latter account is
significant for being, as far as I know, the only mention anywhere of “temples” as locations of sacrifice in
Dahomey.

In the conquest of the Aztecs, human sacrifice played an important symbolic role. It represented a practice so
abhorrent that it could, almost alone, provide the legitimation for the swift and thorough conquest of its per-
petrators. In a letter to the Spanish court, Cortés wrote: “I forbade them to sacrifice human beings to the idols,
as they were accustomed to do, for besides their being hateful to God, Your Majesty has also prohibited it by
laws and commanded that those who killed should be put to death.” In his History of the Conquest of Mexico,
William H. Prescott wrote that a practice as repugnant as human sacrifice not only enjoined conquest but gave
it the stamp of divine imperative:

In this state of things, it was beneficially ordered by Providence that the land should be delivered over to
another race, who would rescue it from the brutish superstitions that daily extended wider and wider, with
extent of empire. The debasing institutions of the Az-
tecs furnish the best apology for their conquest.

The preoccupation with skulls and sacrifice in early European accounts of Dahomey was similarly rooted in
the legitimizing value these descriptions could confer upon the conquerors. Dalzel, an important chronicler
who was himself involved in the slave trade, contended

Cortés participated in the Spanish conquest of Cuba in 1511. During his tenure as a colonial of-

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in his History of Dahomy that Africans were naturally inclined to war, and that the Atlantic slave trade was not responsible for increasing this putatively natural tendency. Of this claim, Loren K. Waldman writes:

_The History of Dahomy_ is a disguised attempt to refute the charge made in Parliament by Wilberforce that Africans were incited to war to provide slaves for the trade. To achieve this, Dalzel attempted to prove in _The History_ that the Africans had always gone to war, and that the European trade had had no influence on this natural propensity of the Africans.35

Dalzel not only attempted to justify the British conquest and slave trade by reference to the sacrifice of war victims, but he did so by drawing explicit analogy to the Aztecs:

"There is a peculiar degree of propriety in instancing Mexico, when we speak of the fate of prisoners of war, not only as it was the most polished of all the savage nations which the Europeans have discovered, but also the most cruel to its captives. Besides which, it furnishes instances of wars, where the sole object was that of obtaining victims for sacrifice, the very thought of which is too shocking to endure for the moment. . . . Whatever evils the slave-trade may be attended with (and there is no good without some mixture of evil) this we are sure of; it is mercy to the unfortunate brave; and not less to poor wretches who, for a small degree of guilt, would otherwise suffer from the butcher's knife; too many instances of which have fallen under the consideration of travellers and of which more than one occurs in _The History._"36

The notable feature of this passage is the way in which Dalzel wants to excuse the slave trade on the grounds that, since the Dahomeans share membership in the community of "savage nations," they bear some of the blame for whatever abhorrent practices exist elsewhere—anywhere—in that community. The reasoning is consistent with what we have seen to be both a foundation and an outcome of conventionalized and stereotypic representations of the Other: the idea that all of the "savage nations" are fundamentally alike.

When we turn from textual to pictorial representations, the link between the Aztec and the Dahomean traditions is more direct. Accounts of both the Aztecs and the Dahomeans are filled with engravings representing scenes associated with human sacrifice. In his _Voyage to Africa_, McLeod used Dalzel's _History_ extensively as a source for background on the "traditional" customs of Dahomey. In fact, three of the four engravings by I. Clark that appear in McLeod's book are acknowledged to be modeled on some of the illustrations from Dalzel's _History_. One engraving from McLeod's book, "Sacrifice of Victims" (figure 15), is a composite from two plates in Dalzel's book, one titled "Victims for Sacrifice" and the other "Last Day of the Annual Customs for Watering the Graves of the King's Ancestors."

What is particularly of interest, however, is not the acknowledged source of inspiration for Clark's "Sacrifice of Victims" in McLeod's _Voyage_ but rather what I propose to be an unacknowledged source of inspiration: Direxit's engraving of the Aztec "Cimetiére des sacrifices" (frontispiece), published in 1780 in the eleventh volume of _de La Harpe's Abridgé de l'Histoire générale des voyages._

A careful comparison of Direxit's 1780 engraving to Clark's 1820 engraving reveals many similarities. The overall layouts of the respective tableaux are the same. The horizons in the two illustrations are created through similar uses of space, with perspective produced by a sloping diagonal from left to right. Both engravings are cut in two by semicircles running from right to left; one is created by a wall, the other by a string of figures in classical dance postures.

Many of the details are also similar. Compare in par-

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*Figure 15. "Sacrifice of Victims."*
ticular the gesture of the figure at the bottom right of each tableau; the triad composition toward the center, especially the facial expression and position of the arm on the figure that appears full-face; the pose of the crouching person with a string of beads in the depiction of the Dahomean scene, as compared to the crouching figure on the fourth step of the amphitheater in the Aztec portrait; the use of Roman togas to clothe the figures in both scenes; and, finally, the stance assumed by the figure at the top of the steps in the 1780 illustration, as compared to the position of the person holding the umbrella, standing on the platform in the upper left-hand corner of the 1820 illustration.

It appears, then, that Clark, the engraver of "Sacrifice of Victims" for McLeod's Voyage, was familiar with Dirceut's "Cimetières des sacrifices," published in France 40 years earlier. An image said to represent the Aztecs of the New World has been used to construct an image said to represent the Dahomeans of West Africa. Neither image displays much ethnographic or geographic accuracy. But the illustrations suggest ways in which images of non-Europeans circulated through channels of European scholars and artists, and how depictions of distant and very different cultures were combined in European representations of the Other.

John Howland Rowe has argued that the idea of studying others in order ultimately to understand ourselves originated among scholars of Classical antiquity during the Renaissance, when studies of the Classical period provided models for characterizing differences among cultures. "Only when men had learned to see differences by studying the past," Rowe writes, "were they able to observe contemporary differences in the world around them in any systematic fashion." Renaissance studies of the ancient world sought therefore to be thought of as the foundation of the anthropological endeavor, since, as Rowe observes, when "the problem of describing contemporary non-Western cultures arose, there were Renaissance studies of Roman customs and institutions to serve as precedents."

In the Age of Discovery, European travelers, writers, and illustrators were faced with the challenge of describing and depicting foreign landscapes and cultures that neither they nor their audience had ever encountered. To accomplish this task, writers and illustrators used earlier images of what was thought to be foreign or exotic as models for their representations of non-Europeans. At first, these models derived from Renaissance studies of Classical antiquity. Later, however, the reliance on Classical models became less important, and Europeans began to turn increasingly to early accounts of discovery and exploration as specific models for the representation of non-Europeans. Eventually, of course, all these models became intertwined, so that by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries one finds illustrations in which neoclassical figures wearing Roman togas are used to represent such diverse nonclassical cultures as the ancient Aztecs of Mexico and the Dahomeans of West Africa.

The standardized, stereotyped, and conventionalized representation of non-Europeans often tells us less about the people it intends to portray than it does about the values of Europeans themselves. Today, in anthropology, there is a growing interest in understanding ourselves not only by attempting to conduct objective studies of the non-European but also by scrutinizing the inevitable subjectivity in our own representations of other cultures. What we are trying to do, in other words, is to see ourselves not so much through the comparative lens provided by ethnographies of different cultures but rather through a serious analysis of our own somewhat myopic vision.

Notes


3 Bucher, 3.


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Hodgen, 34.


Quoted in Batten, 73.

Batten, 73.


Gombrich, 68–69.

Bucher, 35.


Joppien and Smith, 8.

Joppien and Smith trace the background of this convention to anatomical drawings such as the “Muscle Men,” a series of woodcuts drawn by John Stephen de Calcar for Andreas Vesalius’s De Humanis Corporis Fabrica (Basel, 1543). The engravings show a human figure from different angles with partially exposed musculature and bones standing on a hill that overlooks a small town.


For details on de Bry’s models for his engravings of American Indians, see Stefan Lorant, The New World: The First Pictures of America (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946), 231.


In de La Harpe, 11:246.


John McLeod, A Voyage to Africa, with some account of the manners and customs of the Dahomean people (London: John Murray, 1820), 60.


Dalzel, The History of Dahomy (1793), xxiv–xxv.
