The Warrior Tradition and the Masculinity of War

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At the Annual meeting of the Organization of African Unity held in Kampala in July 1975, Field Marshal Idi Amin drew attention to the presence of women in a special “suicide squad of the Ugandan Armed Forces.” The question arose whether African women were about to play a bigger role in African military establishments. If this were to happen, how would it affect the status of women in African societies? And how does modern military technology relate to that process?

In cultures which are otherwise vastly different, the role of the warrior has been reserved for men. “Our sons are our warriors,” This is virtually universal. (Israel is no exception, in spite of contrary appearances.)

Again, in cultures which are otherwise vastly different, crimes of violence have been disproportionately committed by men. The jails of the world bear solemn testimony to the basic masculinity of violent crime.

Is there a connection between this masculinity of violent crime and the preponderant masculinity of the military profession? The barracks and the prisons have a majority of men. Is this link between warriorhood and Mafiahood accidental? Or are there organic interconnections between the two?

On Violence and Masculinity

Images of valour, courage, endurance, and maturity have, in different societies, been intimately related to the role of the male in social and military affairs. Sexual division of labour has been both a cause and an effect of a range of social symbols defining boundaries of propriety and congruence. We have discussed this in a related context of the warrior tradition in relation to the origins of the State.

Especially pertinent for politics and war is a historic link between manliness and capacity for violence. Nothing illustrates this more poignantly than the sexual ambivalence of at least one major prophet of non-violence in modern history. In this ambivalence we see that link between masculinity and martial prowess.

In his psychological study of Mahatma Gandhi, Erik H. Erikson refers to
Gandhi's tendency to see himself as half man and half woman, and his aspiration to acquire motherly qualities. Factors identified with Gandhi's bisexual state of mind range from his love for homespinning, traditionally women's work, to his self-description as a widow when a man dear to him died. We shall return to Gandhi's case later in this paper. We know that his renunciation of sexual activity, combined with a motherly interest in a young girl's physical development, added to the widespread speculation about Gandhi's psychological orientation with regard to sex.

"He undoubtedly saw a kind of sublimated maternalism as part of the positive identity of a whole man, and certainly of a homo religiosus. But by then all overt phallicism had become an expendable, if not a detestable matter to him. Most men, of course, consider it not only unnecessary, but in a way indignant, and even irreverent, to disavow a small god-given organ of such singular potentials; and they remain deeply suspicious of a sick element in such sexual self-disarmament. And needless to say, the suspicion of psychological self-castration becomes easily linked with the age-old propensity for considering the renunciation of armament and abandonment of malehood."

Erikson goes on to suggest in passing that increasing the mechanization of warfare would continue to decrease the equation of manliness with martial qualities. The move from the spear to the intercontinental ballistic missile amounts to some extent to the demasculination of warfare. Face to face warfare makes greater demands on individual courage than does destruction by remote control. Gandhi's nonviolence, linked to Gandhi's sexual renunciation, was a simultaneous renunciation of both the spear and the penis. In Erikson's words:

"Here, too, Gandhi may have been prophetic; for in a mechanized future the relative devaluation of the martial model of masculinity may well lead to a freer mutual identification of the two sexes."

Africa still has many societies that are within a combat culture of the spear. In such societies killing is a confrontation between individuals, and a man tests his manliness within a spear-throw of another. In such cultures martial and sexual qualities become virtually indistinguishable for the male of the species. Eligibility for marriage is sometimes tied to experience in killing – just as the war hero in developed technological societies continues to enhance his sexual appeal. There are of course differences of scale in the killing between a culture of the spear and a culture of bombs falling from B-52s. And the purposes of the violence may be intelligible to one culture and bizarre to another. What we do know is that within the culture of the spear, the effort is more deeply personal. The bridegroom revels in having known moments of violence and danger.

Colin M. Turnbull was once looking at a Dodo tribesman called Lemu, and reflected on issues of this kind in a comparative perspective.

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