

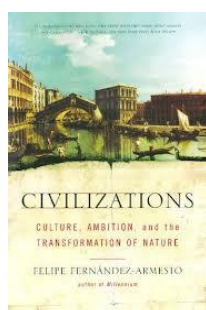
# Why We Are Nations and Tribes

Nations, tribes, clans, families are labels and names we give ourselves to differentiate and to give meaning to our lives and our state of being. You may ask why differ and what satisfying meaning could be attained from being separate from one another? After all, being different nations and tribes does imply some kind of separation. Isn't unity better than separation? These questions that I begin this essay with are some of the most fundamental questions ever asked by our species.

Nations and tribes have long histories of hate and setting up borders between peoples and cultures. We love the pride and vanity associated with our own nation. These qualities lead us to supremacist ideologies but when two separate nations vie for supremacy the nation that is more arrogant suppresses the other until their vanity makes them forgetful and the oppressed then takes a turn to be belligerent and vengeful, thus perpetuating a cycle of hatred and violence until each side realises it is better to treat both nations with respectful equality and to be united.

If nations and tribes only existed for pride and vanity - for the euphoria in singing the national anthem and displaying their native colours and cultures for extravagance - then it would make better sense to do away with nations and tribes. But there is a more fundamental explanation for our species being diverse and multi-cultured and it has to do with what a civilization is, what goes into creating a civilization and what the outcomes are from being a civilized.

Felipe Fernandez Armesto's book *Civilizations* is a most compelling, verbose and erudite history on civilizations in all the different latitudes and climes of the world. The book has 7 parts and 17 chapters spread over 468 pages. Below is the cover of the book:



Following in the established tradition of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun, in his famous Muqadimah, Armesto's first chapter of the book first asks about defining what a civilization is. In its simplest and broadest definition the distinctive attribute of a civilization is that its people adapt the environment to suit their needs. In other words they change and modify the land and its features. In our class of species humans are the most advanced specie to have this ability. Most other creatures of our class do nothing to change or adapt their environment. Instead the environment changes them. In other words, the other animal creatures evolve to survive and over thousands of years some of them may grow extra limbs, wings or fangs to survive, or quite the opposite, they could shed their limbs and evolve regressively as some ancient land creatures did that eventually became ocean whales and dolphins.

After discussing and formulating the defining qualities of civilizations, Armesto begins his histories of the world's civilizations from very ancient times to more recent times. These histories are organised by type of habitat, ranging from ice and sand deserts and wastelands, swamps, woodlands, grasslands, highlands, river valleys, maritime and oceanic. Most habitats can be located

on several continents and islands, cradling myriads of different and diverse nations and tribes. Each and every nation or tribe succeeded in moving into the region and working a way of life by working the land and changing it to suit them. Some were nomadic, some sedentary. Some were barbaric, some altruistic and humane, some followed myth, some followed Islam or another religion. Some took a bath daily, others did not. Some wore clothes light or heavy, plain or ornate, others roamed the land half naked. Some farmed, some fished, some hunted. All of these and other civilizing traits, customs, skills and technologies came from strivings on their habitat. In all these diverse strivings of the world's civilizing nations and tribes was a wealth of knowledge and ideas exchanged between them in the form of wares, services, foods and fuels that they bartered and traded between themselves.

Now I turn to the Quran and read from the 13<sup>th</sup> verse of the 49<sup>th</sup> surah in 3 segments (3 lines):

Line 1: *Mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and*

Line 2: *Made you into peoples (nations) and tribes,*

Line 3: *So that you might come to know each other...*

(Quran translation by Moulana Wahiduddin Khan)

In the first line we are told of our origins. We are the children of Adam and Eve. We are all united in having the same ancestral mother and father. Irrespective of whether we are white skinned, black or brown skinned, or the differences in our languages, the colour of our eyes, the shapes of our noses and the colour and quality of hair that grows out of us, we all are united in being human beings. This segment of this verse is verified by the scientific study of human DNA that shows that all peoples of all the different nations and tribes in the world have the same DNA signature.

In the second line we are told of peoples (nations) and tribes. To give context to this segment of the verse I now reference the 19<sup>th</sup> verse of the 10<sup>th</sup> surah of the Quran wherein God explicitly states that mankind was at one time one nation but that as time passed on the people differed among themselves. It is my interpretation that in those early days of our history everyone lived in one place and was united in one culture as one people. At a particular time, when they began to differ among themselves a command issued from God to this first community of mankind to depart from one another and from their place of origin. This was not a scything punishment from God. There was purpose and wisdom behind this command. For God sent us into the four directions of the uninhabited, uncivilized world on a quest of knowledge. We went in groups across sand and snow, tundra and taiga, sylvan forests and savannas, crags and cliffs, vales and dales, shores and ridges. Each group became its own people with their own language, style of dressing, local palate, mode of transport, wares and worries. Each people developed, civilized and built its own library of knowledge archived in their traditions, rites and customs, prayers, cultures and skills. Thus in the making of nations and tribes are the makings of civilizations and specialised libraries of knowledge.

In the third line of this verse God tells us what we must do with our libraries of knowledge. God says that we must know each other. The word '*know*' is a prefix to knowledge. Thus for the different and separate peoples (nations) and tribes to know one another they will enquire of each other cultures and traditions. They will also exchange their wares and properties in trades and pass between them news skills and technologies.

In the knowing of the different peoples knowledge is exchanged and shared. Thus all of mankind accumulates a wealth of knowledge they did not have before when they lived singularly in one region. Knowledge is the wealth of the nations. Our silks, velvets, cottons, cars and computers, homes and hospitals, towns and cities, dams, dojos, universities, umbrellas, igloos and incense – all of these and so much more are stores of knowledge from adapting and civilizing the uncivilized

world, around, below and above us. We are nations and tribes in the way of knowledge. We go out and accumulate knowledge and then we meet and share it.

In conclusion I return back to the theme of pride, vanity and supremacy that I discussed in the introduction of this essay. In the concluding segment of the above mentioned Quranic verse (verse 49:13). God Says: “...*The noblest of you in God’s sight is the one who fears God most. God is all knowing and all-aware.*” Here God is reminding us that we were not separated from one another for pride and vanity and to vie with one another for supremacy. We must not look at foreign cultures and think they are inferior. We may belong to a flourishing river valley civilization such that of the Nile river in Egypt or the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia or the Indus river in India but we must think that these materialistic things make us better than Eskimos living in ice deserts or fishing villagers on the island of Japan or woodland tribes in Europe. Neither can the African in his magnificent physical stature look down upon smaller built Asians and claim supremacy over them.

The best of peoples are not those that have the best resources or the strongest physique but those that fear God most. The Arabic word used in this Quran verse for which Moulana Wahiduddin Khan translated as ‘*fears God most*’ is taqwa and the root, literal meaning of taqwa is the fear of God. To constantly fear God inculcates the quality of humility in a person. Thus God implores us to toward humility. And when we are humble before God we can look beyond vanity and see the common good for all of Mankind – that we are nations and tribes in pursuit of knowledge, enlightenment and truth. Imbued with humility a person is directed toward righteousness and goodness in all things. When we combine belief in God with righteousness then we call this quality obedience to God. When we combine belief in God, with humility and righteousness we call this quality piety. Thus taqwa embodies obedience to God and piety, which is how many Muslim scholars explain taqwa in its broadest sense.

If we are to look for supremacy and sovereignty we must turn to God because it is he alone that has the greatest claim to supremacy and sovereignty. God is sovereign over the whole Earth and all its foods and commodities. Resources are from God and strength is from God. Receive them as gifts and be grateful. Do not be arrogant and haughty for what you are endowed with. Look beyond the pride of your nation. Look beyond the vanity your tribe. All the lands of the earth are trusted to us in the pursuit knowledge. As I mentioned above from referencing verse 10:19 we were all one people, on one earth, on one land. Africa is not only for Africans. Neither is India only for Indians. Europe is not only for Europeans. Israel is not only for Jews. Arabia is not only for Arabs.

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