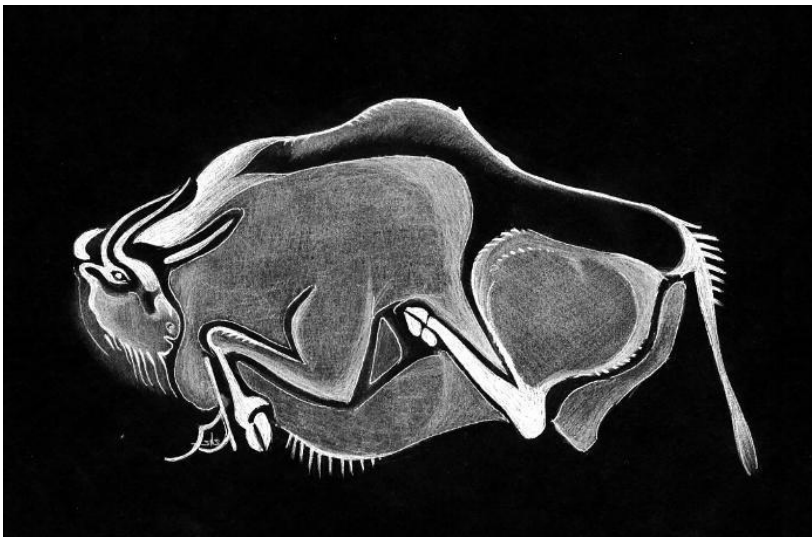


Background for Cultural Streams International.

By A.N. 'Shen' Sengupta

The word 'Culture' means different things to different people. To many it is synonymous with the word 'Civilization'. Thus one is variously referred to as cultured or civilized as opposed to, uncivilized or even primitive. Yet culture and civilization do not necessarily go hand in hand. Neither is primitive devoid of culture. To a great majority of people world over culture comprises fine arts, dance, drama, music, festivals and literature and for them the richness of a specific people in these respects is a measure of their culture.

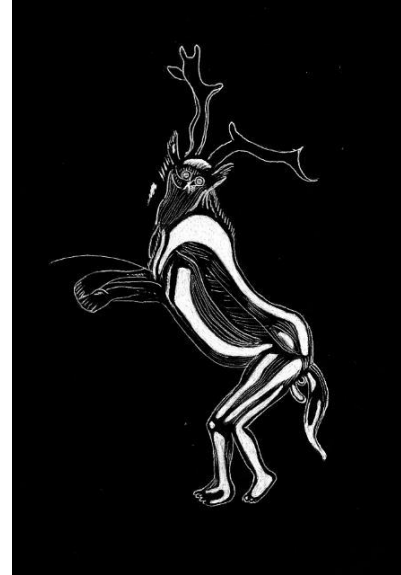


Altamira Cave Painting; Reproduction by Shomit Sengupta

implied that culture is not static; it continues to evolve unhindered. If we study the development of early man, we find the beginnings of many of the cultural traits of modern man. Amazingly we find, in the cave settlements of early man, examples of highly sophisticated paintings and terracotta figures, whose magic continue to work on us even today and which have inspired some of the greatest names in modern painting! Yet these people were not civilized, in the sense that they did not dwell in permanent settlements, called cities. But did they have culture! Indeed they did. They were a world apart from other ape species. They were already building on successive layers of learning how not only to survive better through organized actions but also making sense of what was unknown. The seeds of many aspects of today's culture like administration, law, defence systems, entertainment, social systems, beliefs and arts were already being sown.

Culture is defined as the sum-total of all that humanity has learned from time immemorial until today and passed on to successive generations. The emphasis is on learnt behaviour as opposed to inherited behaviour. Even other animals, in particular certain ape species, quite clearly exhibit the capability of having rudimentary culture in this sense of the word. It is also

At least since some 500,000 years ago man learnt how to make fire, make meat and tubers tender and stay warm using fire and animal skins. He also made crude stone tools to fend off enemies and kill animals for food. In the evenings a group would gather around a fire and the chief would act out stories, real and imagined, to entertain on one hand and to make sense of birth, disease and death, the travels of the sun and the moon, thunder and lightning and the many whys of hunts. All this comprised culture in its infancy but culture nonetheless. A notable aspect of 'primitive' culture, which is largely lost in the modern world, was early man's ability to live in symbiosis with Nature, a feature which is present even today among the so-called primitive people.



Les Trois Frères Cave Painting; Reproduction by Shomit Sengupta

It is generally but not universally agreed that early man originated in one lush valley of Africa, some four million years ago. From here he branched out in different directions possibly migrating with animal herds, in tune with the advancing and receding ice covers and vegetation, over tens of thousands of years and over on-again and off-again land bridges between continents and islands. As people grew in number and increasingly settled down by necessity where they were, they developed techniques to survive without having to follow animal herds and seasonal vegetation or dance to the tunes of climatic adversities and built villages out of logs, stones, skin and leaves. At the same time they not only developed different local cultures but also different bodily features, such as skin colour.

It is said that all present human beings are the descendants of one lady, who has been named 'Lucy' by today's anthropologists. And even though early man was free to roam any corner of the earth without any artificial boundaries, progressively boundaries were drawn across lands to separate one people from the neighbouring peoples with different cultures and bodily features, thus facilitating ever-greater differences. Many wars have been fought through millenniums between the black, white, yellow, red and brown descendants of Lucy because of the apparent differences between cultures and appearances, often to gain a larger share of whatever was perceived to bring greater power and happiness often at the expense of others' sufferings. In the process the fact that down deep we are all related and our feelings, hopes and despairs are alike was conveniently forgotten or deliberately overlooked.



'Lucy's' descendants migrate across the continents; Drawing by author.

Today there is increasing realization, thanks to fast and easy communication, some face to face and the most through high-tech means, that we are inseparable and that the problems and promises facing mankind are only global in scope. Perhaps at no time the saying that 'United we stand and divided we fall' was more relevant for mankind than it is today. There is much to gain through co-operation and none through confrontation. Indeed, the resources of the world are apparently limited and no amount of in-fighting will change that fact. Yet, given that there is potentially unlimited energy at man's disposal as long as the sun shines and thereby unlimited scope to create abundant supplies of anything under the sky, if only man makes his best effort in constructing rather than obstructing or destroying, it appears counter-productive to waste human effort in confrontation instead of co-operation for common good.

This essentially is the background for creating a forum called Cultural Streams International, its motto, 'Networking Cultures Around The Globe', and its logo based on a maypole representing people of all colours and creeds dancing in harmony around a common cause.

Note:

The author is an expert on History of Cities, which he taught at several universities. His related research naturally led him to anthropology on one hand and the most forward-looking city development on the other. His article covers the entire span of human development.