

**Media Review**

McMahan, K. Should we all move to New Guinea? The benefits of traditional societies: A review of J. Diamond, J. (2012), *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?*

**The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?** Jared Diamond. New York: Penguin Group, 2012. (ISBN 978-0-6700-2481-0)

The purpose of Jared Diamond's book, *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?*, is to shed light on the way in which traditional people live in contrast to the WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) world, and how some of those traditional societal practices could be of benefit to modern society. Diamond is a professor of geography at UCLA and an avid traveler to New Guinea, where he has lived among the people of those traditional societies while studying birds. He is also the author of several other books, including *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, a Pulitzer Prize winner. Although he acknowledges that there are many practices of traditional societies which are not desirable, such as infanticide, revenge killing, constant war, and famine, he does argue that traditional societies offer various ways of life that could benefit those of us in modern societies. Through looking at research conducted through the study of many traditional societies around the world, Diamond recommends modern societal changes in such practices as childrearing, eating, language, dispute resolution, and social behavior.

Diamond uses his own experience among New Guinea Highlanders, along with experiences of other researchers among the Inuit, Amazonian Indians, Kalahara San people, and more, to reveal what life was like in our past, and continues to be like for some present traditional societies. Using interesting, and often surprising, anecdotes, he explains the different ways in which traditional peoples live, and how it differs so much from our modern societies. Diamond discusses many topics, including social ties and trade, peace and war, how conflicts are resolved, childrearing, treatment of the elderly, paranoia and its benefits, religion, health, eating habits, and language. His book is an exhaustive review of the contrast between modern and traditional societies, in order to demonstrate the benefits that our modern societies offer (such as state governments and laws protecting people, providing ample food, jobs, health care, and education, and preventing war) and also to urge readers to consider returning to some of our past practices in order to have a higher quality of life.

There are several areas of traditional life that Diamond suggests modern societies consider for a higher quality of life. One area modern societies could learn from is childrearing. Through anecdotes, Diamond reveals the benefits of physical contact between mothers and children, allo-parenting (where many in the community work together to help raise a successful, good person), transporting children upright and facing forward (instead of in strollers leaning back and far from the mother's touch), and multi-age playgroups and teaching children to learn to entertain themselves (instead of being entertained constantly by technology). On the other side of the lifespan, Diamond also discusses better ways to treat our elderly as learned from traditional societies.

Healthy eating and lifestyles are another benefit of traditional societies that Diamond brings to light. He drives his point home by showing how our most common diseases and causes of death in the modern world are virtually nonexistent in traditional society (cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes). He stresses the importance of physical exercise to maintain a healthy weight, along with the benefits of eating complex carbohydrates and fresh fruits and vegetables,

instead of packaged and processed foods. Also cited are the dangers of salt and sugar in our modern diet.

Another clear benefit of traditional societies that is so absent from the modern world is bilingualism/multilingualism. Diamond goes into great detail about the results of the modern world's insistence on one language (English) to the detriment of all others, and how this affects non-native speakers of a language. They lose their culture not just their language. He explains how many languages are becoming, or have already become, extinct, yet how we place more importance on saving endangered animals from extinction rather than languages. The enhanced brain connections and social advantages of multilingualism in traditional societies are made quite clear, including the ease with which young children learn language, often without accents. The case he makes for learning and knowing more than one language is a poignant one.

Diamond urges members of modern society to adopt many practices of traditional society too numerous to mention, but one final practice worth mentioning here is that of conflict resolution. One of the most interesting anecdotes in Diamond's book is about a man who accidentally kills a young boy by hitting him with a car as the boy crosses the street. Although in modern society, the issue would have been dealt with through lawyers and third parties and courts, in New Guinea society, the communities of both the boy and the driver were involved. There was help by the family and community of the driver (including his boss), and there was a "say sorry" ceremony and a chance to talk things out and apologize. The mediation that took place, instead of a horrible court drama, was a lovely change, especially since the driver was not at fault, yet still expressed his deep sorrow to the family of the boy through payment of food and ceremony. Diamond acknowledges that such reform could only be accomplished through state intervention, but he does say that one "may be able to utilize by yourself the New Guinea emphasis on informal mediation, emotional clearance, and reestablishment of relationships (or non-relationships) in disputes the next time that you find yourself in a private dispute where tempers are rising" (p. 466).

*The World Until Yesterday* is a dense and scholarly book, but well worth the read. The book is organized around topics in which modern and traditional societies differ, and numerous societal examples are offered for each topic (across many traditional groups). The book is a thick 466 pages long, but the wealth of knowledge and insight into a beneficial future makes the girth worth every word. Although some sections get quite academic (such as the section on salt and sugar, with much medical explanation), others are more readable. Regardless of the topic, though, the many anecdotes allow the message to come across clearly. One of the most powerful parts of the book is the pictures Diamond includes, which are enough to incite excellent debate all on their own. He not only provides pictures of the many people of traditional societies who are represented in the book, but he also shows pictures that directly contrast modern and traditional life. A memorable one is of traditional society children playing with cars they made themselves, thus learning about science and more, while the modern society child is alone with a ridiculous wealth of pre-packaged toys that take no creativity or wit.

As a teacher in an International Baccalaureate PYP School, this book was highly applicable. Personally, it helped me to open my mind and rethink what is truly important—family and personal connections and ingenuity, as opposed to what we tend to value in my community, such as material wealth and prestige. The anecdotes and examples are perfect for helping students to think and debate about which practices are truly more worthy—those of modern society, or those of traditional societies. The pictures Diamond includes are alone enough to make the book worth the purchase, as they can be used to generate discussion and deep thinking for students interested in

opening their minds and learning about the rest of the world in order to develop a more global perspective. This book is potentially life changing in helping teachers and students to re-evaluate those things that are truly important. It is a must read.

**Author Note:** Kimberli McMahan has taught elementary Spanish for 16 years and is the founder and director of the Adams Elementary 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Culture Club, an extra-curricular group whose members strive to be better world citizens by studying and learning about other cultures through presentations, research, field trips and philanthropy. McMahan is a member of the study group that brought the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program to Midland Public Schools and is passionate about internationalism. She loves to travel and in doing so has enjoyed learning the cultures of Spain, Guatemala and South Korea. She can be contacted at [McmahanKD@mps.k12.mi.us](mailto:McmahanKD@mps.k12.mi.us)