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Virginia Luling

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An Anthropologist in Middle-earth

Abstract

The author is an anthropologist who works as a campaigner for indigenous people's rights. From this perspective she has some thoughts about Tolkien's work as a vision of an unwesternized Europe, and on the re-enchantment of the world.

Additional Keywords

anthropology; disenchantment; Drúedain; Drûg; Easterlings; re-enchantment; Southrons; wild men; Woodwose

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We are all human beings, but the fact of our being human does not manifest itself in abstraction but in the particularity of real living human beings in different climes and races. We can talk of the human capacity for language, but the capacity manifests itself in real concrete languages as spoken by different peoples of the earth.

(Ngugi Wa Thiongo, 1993, p. 26)

I

An African tribesman, many years ago, discussing with a British anthropologist the idea that particular clans among his people were specially related to certain plants, animals or objects, jokingly suggested that his guest's symbols should be "paper" and "lorry", since it was these things that had always chiefly helped his people. ("Paper" to this man would have meant not literature but official forms – probably tax forms – or accounts.) He was summarising the view of most people in the modern world of what it means to be "European" – in the sense that includes American, and Western culture generally. Bureaucracy and the machine. "Europeanisation", "westernisation" and "modernisation" are synonymous. "Sarumanisation" would be a fair enough term.

This is often linked with the "rationalisation" which sees the world more and more in terms of impersonal cause and effect rather than personal forces – what the wise and melancholy sociologist Max Weber, quoting Schiller, liked to call the "disenchantment of the world" (*das Entzauberung der Welt*).¹ The gods and fairies disappear, and with them a way of experience. "They are sailing, sailing westward over the sea and leaving us . . ." In Tolkien's work it is the elves who have departed, leaving only scattered and incoherent traditions behind them as clues in the disenchanted present day, the time of "the dominion of Men". What Tolkien audaciously embarked upon was the "re-enchantment of the world". (I nearly wrote "embarked

single-handed", and indeed he clearly often felt desperately alone in his work. But of course his was not the only attempt, and this indeed is one of the recurrent themes in European literature over the last two hundred years.)

The re-enchantment, not just of any part of the world, but his own part, "the north-west corner of the old world", and that simply because it was his own: ". . . if you want to write a tale of this sort you must consult your roots, and a man of the North-west of the Old World will set his heart and the action of his tale in an imaginary world of that air, and that situation" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 212). In his earliest conceptions, it was the island of Britain itself that had once been the elves' country, and it was from there that they took ship. His work is, as Tom Shippey rightly, says, "ethnic". He wanted to celebrate his native country, not as the birthplace of science, commerce and the industrial revolution, but as the final home of enchantment. He stands, so to speak, for a Europe that has not been "Europeanised".

His England, the country that he loved and for whose origins his imagination groped among the clues of legend and language, was not the England that became a commercial Empire, not a conquering but a conquered nation – conquered by "1066 and all that". ("All that" being the "Whig view of history" that is cheerfully mocked in the Sellars and Yeatman book.) So with that other island nation, Númenor: the time when its people became conquerors of "lesser men", the age of their greatest outward power and wealth, was also the time of their inward corruption when they began to worship Sauron.²

But such is the identification of Europe with modernity, that people today who look for a not-yet-disenchanted world generally find it, or think they find it, among the peoples of the "third world", or even more in that "fourth world" of indigenous minorities who have been called the "victims of progress" (Bradley, 1975). As an anthropologist by training, I have studied peoples of that kind, and my job at present is

¹ Weber, placed by fate in the opposite camp to Tolkien in more than one sense, believed that this emptiness and impersonality was a destiny that had to be faced, and that only cowardice would make one deny it.

² The relation between this and Tolkien's English Catholicism – the embattled faith of a minority with memories of persecution – is naturally obscure both to the mainstream English, who still tend to see the Roman Church as foreign and somewhat creepy, and to people from other countries where it is synonymous with power and establishment.

with an organisation that campaigns on their behalf when, as frequently happens, they are dispossessed or persecuted. My hope is that by bringing these two preoccupations of mine together, I can provide a slightly unusual angle on Tolkien's work.

I suggest that Tolkien's imagination brings him close to such peoples, even though they are geographically distant and different in "temper" from those whom he created. An alternative way of approaching this theme would be to recall another centenary that was commemorated in 1992, that of Columbus' discovery of America, and the clash between those who glorify that event and what it symbolises, and those who mourn it. I claim that Tolkien's work puts him among the mourners, though some of the latter might not readily recognise him as an ally. This is not the place even to touch on the tortuous issues of actual power in the primary world – I am concerned only with the imperialism of the imagination.

For instance, it is a common experience in such traditional societies, that old people fear to tell their legends to the Western investigator or the young man who has been to school, for fear of being snubbed or laughed at. When I was doing research in a small town in Somalia, there were those who did not want me to write down legends like the one about how their town was covered in mist which hid the sun, until a miraculous boy was made their ruler, and became the ancestor of a dynasty which still continues, or the one about another ancestor who became the unwilling guest of a water-spirit at the bottom of the river, and then was set free with magical gifts – for fear I would publish them and so make their community look ridiculous.

Then again, the thing that often seems to separate such peoples from "western" society is their intense closeness to and love of the earth, of their land. Take, for instance these words of *Datu* (leader) Mampadayag of the Banwaon tribe in the Philippines:

For us, the earth is the Creator's gift. We see it as connected to our own lives, physically part of our bodies. we live on the earth and return home to it at death . . . the earth is our parent, it is our father and mother who helps us grow and wakes us from our sleep. The earth is dear to our bodies. When our bodies are pinched it hurts; when the land is ravaged, it hurts in the same way. The earth is filled with life: bees, pigs, birds, monkeys, trees, fish and wild chickens. This is the milk of the Creator that we take from her breasts. This gives abundance to our lives.

(Survival International, 1991, p. 2)

Not so far from this is the closeness to the earth and love of it that is a theme of Tolkien's work, embodied especially in the Elves, whose lives are part of the life of the Earth, and who cannot leave it. The tension between the earth-bound Elves, and Men, whose destiny lies "beyond the circles of the world", is an aspect of Tolkien's wrestling with the relation of Christianity to "paganism", both in its light and in its dark and malign aspects. He responded to the struggle which he saw going on in the mind of the poet of *Beowulf*, between his faith on the one hand, and his loyalty and reverence for his

native tradition on the other – the same struggle that still goes on in many consciences all over the world today.

Tolkien, the sincere Christian who decided that what his nation needed was a "pagan" mythology, stood with the *Beowulf* poet in defending the old heroic tales against their narrow and fanatical suppressors (narrowness and fanaticism are perennial and come in many forms). So, too, his work by implication stands with the Filipino *Datu*, and the old men who fear their stories will be laughed at by the school-educated young.

Also, perhaps, as a celebrator of trees, with one small and not yet articulate representative of an unassuming people:

". . . As he came to a towering, smooth tree, he placed his hands against the trunk to steady himself, drew back his head, and stared up at the tree, all the way up to the leafy kingdom of its crown spread out against the sky. He stood that way for ten minutes, now and again gently patting the tree." This was Baja, a motherless toddler from the Aka Pygmies in central Africa, whose community was being wiped out by disease until they moved back into their forest. "I carried Baja out to his tree every day for a week . . . At first I had no hope that he would live, but like the rest of us he had been through the worst. He, too, was a survivor."

(Sarno, 1993)

II

So far I have looked at the general stance of Tolkien's work; now I want to enter Middle-earth and look at some of its inhabitants, and consider how he treats the equivalent of the non-European peoples that anthropologists generally study – first the "wild men" of Druadan forest, or as they become in his later writings, the Drúgs; and then the peoples of the South and East of Middle-earth. In fact, it was some time in the development of Tolkien's world before these peoples became distinct. In the early versions of the Helm's Deep chapter, the "Wild Men" are fighting for Saruman; these later became the Dunlendings (Tolkien, 1990, pp. 16, 18).

The phrase "wild men" first occurs, in the final version of *The Lord of the Rings*, when Faramir, explaining the Gondorian theory of anthropology to Frodo and Sam says, ". . . so we reckon Men in our lore, calling them the High, or Men of the West, which were Númenoreans; and the Middle Peoples, Men of the Twilight, such as are the Rohirrim and their kin that dwell still far in the North; and the Wild, the Men of Darkness" (Tolkien, 1987a, p. 287). Here the phrase does not seem to refer to the Drúedain, but to the peoples under Sauron's domination. Now this sounds very like the classic Victorian evolutionary sequence of Savagery – Barbarism – Civilisation, which was around in Tolkien's youth, and has still not disappeared from the public mind though anthropologists dropped it long ago.

But if we look closer, we see that the resemblance is only superficial; the whole structure of assumption underlying the two schemes is quite different. For the anthropology of Middle-earth is not evolutionary at all. The "high" civilisations of Gondor and its predecessor Númenor have

not developed by their own interior dynamic out of societies like that of the Rohirrim; they owe their arts and wisdom to their contact with the Elves, their teachers. And the “high” cultures are not about to lead on to something else even higher and better – Saruman is not an improvement except in certain aspects of technology. The Rohirrim, too, owe their “twilight” status to being descended from the Elf-friends of old. The “Men of Darkness” are those who have not enjoyed the influence of the Elves, and thus fall an easy prey to Sauron. “Sauron dominates all the multiplying hordes of Men that have had no contact with the Elves and so indirectly with the true and unfallen Valar” (Tolkien, 1981, p.153). The Elves, though not free from corruption themselves, are transmitters of the knowledge – I think one can fairly say the faith – of Aman, by which they and their allies resist Sauron. They are also the teachers of the arts of life – building, writing, and all that is generally summed up as “civilization” – but this is by virtue of their own innate gifts. In evolutionary thinking the advance of civilisation is also a progressive “disenchantment” as people grow more rational (whatever exactly that means). But here civilisation and enchantment are not opposed but go together.

As for the Drúedain, the way they develop is typical of Tolkien’s method of work, which was to start from certain hints or suggestions already given – either in outside sources or in his own work – and grow and elaborate them into something new. We first meet them in *The Lord of the Rings*, when they show the Rohirrim the hidden road to Minas Tirith. There they are very much the stereotype of the “savage”. Indeed their appellation “woodwoses” derives from the sort of folkloric traditions from which that stereotype partly derives; for Europeans when they crossed the oceans saw what their traditions predisposed them to see, the embodiments of their own fantasies of “wild men”. They are gnarled and strange in appearance, almost naked, communicate by beating drums, are “woodcrafty beyond compare” (Tolkien, 1987b, p. 105), and hunt with poisoned arrows. One may add that they are constantly hunted and persecuted by other sorts of men, including the Rohirrim. They are also somehow connected with the ancient, huge, Polynesian-looking figures of the Stonewain Valley. The only thing they are not is black, which would be incongruous in supposed ancient inhabitants at this latitude.

So far the Drúedain are a sort of identikit Savage, but Tolkien later elaborated on the rather perfunctory hints contained in *The Lord of the Rings*, as he so often let random hints in his work grow and develop, and the more attention he paid to the Drúedain, the further they moved from the stereotype that seems to underlie the earlier descriptions. They are shown to have a past in the First Age, and are a highly idiosyncratic breed of their own, “a wholly different kind” so different from other men that Tolkien has to take pains to distinguish them from Hobbits or Dwarves. Not only are they not the same as the “men of darkness” – they have

throughout the ages been harried and persecuted by them (Tolkien, 1980a).

The notable thing about these earlier Drúedain or Drúgs – who are not called Wild Men – is their symbiotic relationship with the forest-dwelling People of Haleth. The tie between them was such that they actually migrated together (unlike the Men and Hobbits of Bree, to whom they are compared, who had simply landed up by different routes in the same place). The Haladrim and the Drúgs evidently needed each other.

When you find such a link between human groups in our world, one people is always in some sort of servant or client relationship to the other – not necessarily a grossly exploitative one. Something of the sort would be possible here, and fits in with Tolkien’s intention to turn the old serving man in the “Tale of Túrin”, Sador, into a Drúg (Tolkien, 1980a, p. 386 note 8). I think the tie between them was something like that between the “Pygmies” of the African forests and the taller, farming villagers in the same forests. The Pygmies, as hunters, provide meat and honey to the villagers, and sometimes work on their farms. In exchange they get food crops and other goods (at least that was how it was until recently). I assume that the People of Haleth were farmers growing crops in the forest clearings, and that the Drúgs as hunters similarly provided them with the products of the forest, and with their skill as healers and other uncanny gifts (this is a very common attribute of “separate” people of inferior status), and also did odd jobs, getting their bread and butter in return. We may assume that they were content with the arrangement, since there was limitless forest for them to escape into if they found their conditions unacceptable. In such a situation the only way that unwilling workers can be kept on the job is by physical force, i.e. as slaves – as we are told the Easterlings did in fact keep their thralls.

Part of this reconsideration of the Drúedain is a new look at their representative Ghân-buri-Ghân as he appears in *The Return of the King*, talking pidgin-Westron, and using the name “Wild Men” for his people. Now it turns out he did so as a concession to his hearers – “not without irony” (Tolkien, 1980a, p. 384). A person who can look with irony at others’ labelling of him has become a three-dimensional being with a point of view of his own.

I suggest that this reworking of the nature of the Drúedain was deliberate, almost a retraction; that Tolkien recognised that the Drúedain as they appear in *The Lord of the Rings* are not properly accounted for, since they belong to a different world of thought, and that some way had to be found to explain their characteristics in terms of his world, not that of early twentieth-century popular anthropology. At the same time he made his second attempt (after the dual society of Bree) to draw a situation where two different peoples live side by side in amity.³

³ The Drúgs/Drúedain present some interesting ethnographic problems. There is a remaining puzzle about the Púkel-men of Stonewain Valley – since it was evidently ancestors of the Drúedain who made them. Were they a hunting and gathering or “foraging” people? It seems likely, but hunter-gatherers generally have to keep on the move to live, and people on the move do not carve large monumental statues. There are occasional exceptions to the first of those statements, where there is sufficient abundance of wild foods for a people to

The difference between the men of Rhûn and Harad and the Drúedain is that Tolkien never gave the former the kind of loving attention he gave the latter. We know them only as enemies, Sauron's cannon-fodder. There is only one moment where one of them becomes an individual, the passage where Sam looks at the dead Southron warrior, with "his scarlet robes . . . tattered . . . his black plaits of hair braided with gold . . . drenched with blood"; and "his brown hand" clutching "the hilt of a broken sword", and wonders "what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace" (Tolkien, 1987a, p. 269). The attitude of the Gondor men-at-arms to the people they have been fighting for centuries is straightforward: "Curse the Southrons!" It is the outsider with an innocent eye who asks himself these questions, including, significantly, "what the man's name was".

Apart from this moment they remain vague, undeveloped figures, swarthy, in scarlet, and waving scimitars, or bearded and axe-wielding, never moving beyond the derived stereotype.

If we have something here that looks outwardly like what in our world we know as "racism", we can dismiss that appearance, not only because Tolkien in his non-fictional writing several times repudiated racist ideas, but because – once again – in his sub-creation the whole intellectual underpinning of racism is absent.⁴ The Haradrim and the Variags of Khand are corrupt not because they are biologically inferior but because they are human and therefore corruptible. In any case, though they are politically subject to Sauron it is uncertain – as Sam perceives – how far they are corrupt as individuals (unlike Orcs, who are a separate problem, and one that Tolkien himself never really solved).⁵ The men of Gondor and their allies are "nobler", not by their intrinsic nature but because they have had the luck to inherit from their ancestors the mediated tradition – the faith – of Aman, and more or less held onto it – though they are constantly in danger of letting go. (As far as actual descent goes, they are ultimately the same as the Rohirrim.) There is moreover no question here of "level" of culture – the Variags are clearly the counterparts of the Rohirrim in

this respect.

But was there no opposition, no resistance to Sauron among the peoples of the South and East? We are getting, after all, an entirely Gondorian historical view. By definition this would be aware only of those Southrons and Easterlings who marched in Sauron's armies, not those – if any – who refused to do so. Were there any who refused?

Tolkien appears to have thought not. In the conception of the work, the men of those regions were all servants of the Enemy, whether corrupted or deluded. (One thing we are told is that the other two Wizards of the Five, the Blue Wizards, went to the East; we do not know what happened to them or whether they fulfilled their mission. Tolkien himself (1981, p. 280) suggested that they abandoned it and themselves became the centre of "magical" cults, which later survived). What seems to underlie this is a deeply pessimistic assumption about Men in general – that unless touched by Aman, mediated by the Elves, they are bound to become corrupt. This willingness to condemn Men in the lump arises out of a dark and despairing undercurrent in Tolkien's work, and balances his at times almost excessive readiness to go easy on the individual (as Tom Shippey has noted – 1992, pp. 138-9). But at the same time one feels that he just was not particularly interested in the Southrons and Easterlings.

Partly I think this is because in a sense they do not belong in the mythical framework at all. All mythologies are necessarily both universal and local: universal in their scope, because they deal with the nature of things; local in point of view and "temper", because they arise out of particular cultures. This tension is present in the mythology⁶ devised by Tolkien, since it is both about the human condition in general, and deliberately made specific to a certain part of the world.

In the cosmology of the early work, much of the world seems to be uninhabited. In the legends of the First Age, the action is firmly confined to the north-west, and men of other regions do not enter into consideration, except as coming into the projected tale of Eärendil's voyages, and that never did get off the ground. With the Second and Third Ages, however, the geography shifts south-east, with the Enemy's fortress in that quarter, and it is natural that his armies are recruited from those regions, and that they draw on inherited

form permanent settlements. One such people were the Indians of the Northwest American coast, the Kwakiutl and others, who enjoyed such abundance of fish in their rivers that they had no need to move around, and they did indeed produce large and impressive carvings – not in stone, but in wood, the famous "totem poles". So what was the Drúedain equivalent of the Kwakiutl's salmon? Or had they actually taken up farming or herding at one time, and developed a more complex society, before they were driven back into the forests and a hunting and hunted existence? Another problem is how many people the Druadan Forest could actually have supported by this way of life, which needs large areas of country per person. The forest seems to have been only about 60 by 20 miles. Ghân-buri-Ghân's band was probably quite small. But I prefer to leave this question unanswered, and let the Púkel-men keep their mystery.

⁴ The intellectual basis of much modern anti-racism is also absent. Opposition to racism since World War II has been backed by the scientific dismantling of the whole concept of "races" as permanent, distinct entities, and with the scientifically more debatable tendency to minimize or even deny altogether the importance of heredity of any kind. But in Tolkien's world heredity – descent – is clearly very important, together with an emphasis on hierarchy, understood as opposed to tyranny, not synonymous with it.

⁵ A note on racial characteristics of Orcs: they are (a) "swart", i.e. black or brown, (b) slant-eyed, and (c) extremely hairy. So take your pick.

⁶ It has been questioned whether "mythology" is really the appropriate term for Tolkien's work. Tolkien himself hardly ever used it; instead, he uses a number of different words, as though he, like his commentators since, could never find quite the right term to describe what he had invented. *Legendarium* (or connected body of legend) is perhaps the nearest to the mark. Yet since it does start off with a "cosmogonic myth", and includes a pantheon of god-like beings, the word seems unavoidable.

images of “paynims” and other enemies.

Moreover, it is essential to the mythical vision that was in Tolkien’s work from the beginning that there should be one, and only one, source of resistance, and that is situated in the North-west. “These legends are North-centred – because it is represented as an historical fact that the struggle against Morgoth and his servants occurred mainly in the North, and especially in the North-west, of Middle-earth, and that was so because the movement of Elves, and of Men afterwards escaping from Morgoth, had been inevitably *westward*, towards the Blessed Realm, and *north-westward* because at that point the shores of Middle-earth were nearest to Aman” (Tolkien, 1980b, p. 398). To have shown many sources of rebellion would confuse the picture; besides, it is also essential to the myth that the resisters should be greatly outnumbered.

So there was no resistance among the Haradrim. If this was Tolkien’s view of the matter I must accept it; since it is his sub-creation, not mine. (In any case, as we have seen, it was not a question that concerned him much.) However, it concerns me, and when a work is put into the public domain it becomes available to other imaginations, and it is I think legitimate to give one’s fantasy a little play in the world Tolkien made available to us. I have another idea of what happened in these regions, which, following his own method, draws on hints in the work itself.

Just because there was no large scale and successful resistance to Sauron outside the North-west, need this mean no resistance at all? Perhaps the two Wizards who went to

the East did not altogether fail in their mission. Perhaps Gandalf’s undercover activities in Near Harad (Tolkien, 1980b, p. 398) were not fruitless. Did the Valar not have ways of letting their influence reach these peoples, or appear among them, even in strange forms? Are there unwritten chapters in the history of Middle-earth? If there are, they would have to be written in other languages, and belong to another “earth and air”. (What was the name of the strange warrior?)

There was at least one person from the North-west, we know, who had travelled far into those regions and had more than the ordinary Gondorian knowledge of them. In my imagination I like to add a paragraph to the great tale (found in only one manuscript of the Red Book, it clearly represents a tradition from Gondor, but its authenticity is disputed), telling how when King Elessar, after his crowning “sat on his throne in the Hall of the Kings and pronounced his judgements” and “embassies came from many lands and peoples”, and he “pardoned the Easterlings that had given themselves up, and sent them away free, and he made peace with the peoples of Harad; and the slaves of Mordor he released” (Tolkien, 1987b, p.246-7) – that among the swarthy envoys from the South, was a face that he recognised. Then, to the amazement of all (and the displeasure of some), the King and the Southron embraced one another – for, long before, this man had saved the life of a hunted stranger from the followers of the Serpent, and they had broken their bread together in an outlaws’ camp under the strange stars.

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