THE ONGOING RELEVANCE OF PRIMITIVE THOUGHT FROM CULTURAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL, AND ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Qani NESIMI, Besime LUTVIJI

Abstract

The concept of "primitivism" constitutes one of the most contentious categories in sociology, the history of religions, the history of anthropology, and social thought, due to the historical, cultural, and epistemological baggage it carries. Traditionally employed to distinguish societies deemed "less developed" from modern ones, this concept has been challenged by anthropological approaches that reject the hierarchical ranking of cultures and the claim that a universal model of human development exists.

This paper aims to analyze the relativity of this concept and the continued contemporary relevance of this mindset across cultural, religious, epistemological, and ethical dimensions, moving beyond interpretations that reduce it merely to an indicator of economic or technological development. The fundamental question posed is whether the "primitive" should be understood as a superseded historical stage of human development, or as an evaluative category that persists within contemporary ways of thinking, judging, and organizing social relations. From this perspective, the "primitive" is examined not as an essential quality inherent to a given society, but as a relational concept whose meaning depends on the cultural, epistemological, and moral criteria through which individuals and human communities are evaluated.

This paper argues that transcending cultural hierarchies does not necessarily eliminate the logic of primitivization, which may re-emerge in new forms of symbolic exclusion, intolerance, and ethnocentric evaluation. Consequently, a critical examination of primitivization remains significant for contemporary anthropology and for reflection on cultural pluralism, the boundaries of knowledge, and ethical responsibility. In this sense, the ongoing relevance of primitivization lies not only in the persistence of the category as a theoretical notion but also in its capacity to reveal the mechanisms through which societies construct differences, define norms, and legitimize hierarchies.

Keywords: primitivization, cultural relativism, anthropology, ethnocentrism, epistemology, ethics.

Introduction

This paper advances the central argument that primitivism should not be understood merely as a historical category within evolutionary anthropology, but rather as a theoretical construct that continues to shape the ways in which cultures are conceptualized, knowledge is produced, and moral conduct is evaluated. From this perspective, primitivism cannot be regarded as a universal, immutable, or objectively defined category of human development. Rather, it constitutes a relative, historically contingent, and culturally mediated concept whose underlying assumptions and modes of thought remain pertinent to the epistemological, cultural, and ethical dimensions of contemporary societies.

The abandonment of the notion of the “primitive” as a unidirectional stage of social evolution does not necessarily imply the dissolution of the underlying logic that sustains this concept. On the contrary, this logic may persist and manifest itself through the hierarchical classification of cultures, the epistemic marginalization of alternative knowledge systems, and moral judgments that associate modernity with notions of superiority. Accordingly, the continuing relevance of primitivism should be examined not merely within the historical development of anthropology, but also through the contemporary mechanisms by which distinctions are constructed and maintained between what is deemed rational and irrational, civilized and uncivilized, and morally acceptable and unacceptable.

Given the relative and context-dependent nature of primitivism, it may be examined from a variety of philosophical, religious, sociological, economic, cultural, epistemological, ethical, and moral perspectives. However, this paper does not seek to explore the economic dimension of primitivism. Instead, it focuses on critically examining its cultural, sociological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions. From this perspective, primitivism is approached not

https://doi.org/10.62792/ut.icfra.y2026.i2.pp86

merely as a phenomenon confined to the past, but also as a persistent mode of thought whose underlying assumptions continue to shape attitudes, perceptions, and social practices within contemporary societies.

A widely held assumption within evolutionary thought is that all human societies progress through a universal sequence of developmental stages, traditionally categorized as savagery, barbarism, and civilization. However, this approach has been challenged by various anthropologists, who argue that cultures do not evolve along a single, universal trajectory; rather, each society possesses its own unique history and path of development. From this perspective, a culture cannot be evaluated solely based on its technological level or differences in its way of life. One of the primary objectives of this paper is to refute the notion that certain people are inherently less intelligent or less capable due to their origins. Anthropologists who support this view argue that there is no scientific evidence to demonstrate the biological superiority of one human group over another. On the contrary, differences in behavior, customs, and social institutions are primarily linked to the social relations, historical processes, and cultural contexts in which they were shaped. In this view, all human societies possess similar mental capacities.

Humanity cannot be understood by dividing people into hierarchical categories, as groups deemed "higher" or "lower", but rather through the study of the history and culture that have shaped them. This approach remains relevant in a contemporary context, as it directly relates to debates concerning racism, ethnocentrism, egocentrism, cultural identity, immigration, and intercultural relations. A central issue in this discourse is the critique of the notion that race determines the mental abilities, moral character, or cultural level of individuals and human groups. Consequently, human groups cannot be classified according to biological hierarchies, as physical traits vary and are influenced by historical and environmental factors; furthermore, culture is not the result of any racial capacity, but rather of historical and social experiences and processes. In this context, anthropologists such as Franz Boas maintained that all human groups possess similar mental capacities and that there is no scientific evidence to support the existence of innate hierarchies among races. He specifically challenged the view that certain people are naturally more intelligent or more capable than others.

Primitivism should not be understood merely as a phenomenon confined to the past or as something devoid of epistemic value

In this context, it is important to consider earlier theoretical perspectives concerning the interpretation, analysis, and conceptualization of primitivism. One particularly significant contribution comes from Claude Lévi-Strauss, the renowned twentieth-century anthropologist, who, in his influential work The Savage Mind (Lèvi-Strauss. Mendimi i Egër. 1999), challenges the evolutionary assumptions underlying conventional interpretations of human intellectual development, particularly those associated with Auguste Comte. Comte's positivist philosophy conceives of the development of human thought as progressing through three successive stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive (scientific). Within this evolutionary framework, earlier forms of knowledge are situated at supposedly less advanced stages of intellectual development, ultimately superseded by scientific reasoning.

Lévi-Strauss, by contrast, challenges the assumption that so-called “primitive” thought constitutes an intellectually deficient form of cognition destined to be replaced by scientific knowledge. He maintains that what he terms “savage thought” (la pensée sauvage) is no less systematic, rational, or oriented towards the establishment of order than scientific thought. The fundamental distinction between these two modes of cognition does not lie in the presence or absence of rational thinking, but rather in the different ways in which knowledge is organized, conceptualized, and applied. Consequently, Lévi-Strauss's perspective challenges the

hierarchical classification of human thought and calls into question the assumption that scientific rationality represents the culmination of a universal and unidirectional process of intellectual evolution.

For an evolutionist like Comte, traditional ways of explaining the world might be interpreted as earlier stages of human thought. Lévi-Strauss, by contrast, demonstrates that the classification systems of traditional societies can be exceptionally complex. Thus, people who classify dozens of types of plants or animals are not thinking 'less scientifically.' Rather, they are constructing a coherent system of knowledge, even if its purpose and method of organization differ from those of modern biology. (Lévi-Strauss. (1999). Mendimi i Egër.). Upon closer examination, Lévi-Strauss argues that there are different ways of organizing thoughts. Both 'savage' (primitive) thought and scientific thought possess rational structures. Modern science does not render traditional thought irrational; traditional forms continue to have their own logic and function. According to Lévi-Strauss, the emphasis lies on structure and the relationships within it. In contrast, Comte posits that thought develops in stages: theological/religious, metaphysical/philosophical, and positivist/materialist, with science being the most advanced form; older forms are considered to be superseded and left in the past, with the focus placed on historical evolution.

Lévi-Strauss does not claim that mythical thought and modern science are identical; he acknowledges the differences between them. What he rejects is the notion that one is merely an inferior stage of the other. Thus, while Comte situates thought within a progressive history of development, Lévi-Strauss seeks to demonstrate that even 'savage' thought possesses its own internal logic and should be analyzed as a system, rather than as a primitive relic of the past. (Lévi-Strauss. (1999). Mendimi i Egër.). In the other hand, during the era of the American anthropologist Franz Boas, it was widely held that all human societies passed through the same successive stages of deve lopment: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. In his work Anthropology and Modern Life, Boas challenges this model. He argues that cultures do not develop along a single, linear path; rather, every society has its own unique history. Furthermore, a culture cannot be evaluated solely based on its technology or the western way of life. Boas's primary objective was to dismantle the notion that certain people are inherently less intelligent or less capable due to their origins. He maintains that there is no evidence to suggest that one human group is biologically superior to another; instead, differences in behavior, customs, and institutions are primarily rooted in history and culture, and people across all societies possess similar mental capacities. (Boas. (1926). Antropologjia dhe jeta moderne.).

We cannot understand humanity, he argues, by dividing people into "higher" and "lower" categories. Instead, we must study the history and culture that have shaped them. This idea remains relevant today, as it connects to contemporary debates on racism, ethnocentrism, egocentrism, cultural identity, immigration, and inter-cultural relations. A central theme of his work is the critique of the notion that 'race' determines an individual's mental abilities, morality, or cultural level. He contends that human groups cannot be ranked within a biological hierarchy, as physical traits vary and are influenced by history and environment; furthermore, culture is not the product of a "racial capacity," but rather the result of historical and social experiences. Boas maintained that all human groups possess similar mental capacities and that there is no scientific evidence for an innate hierarchy among 'races.' He rejected the idea that certain people are inherently more intelligent or capable than others.

Human beings do not respond to the world solely based on their biology; according to Boas, their reactions are also shaped by the language they speak, the norms they acquire, the history of their society, and their cultural values. Therefore, to understand an individual or a group, one must understand the cultural environment in which they were raised. He also points out that, at a time when the U.S. was engaged in intense debate over immigration, he opposed the

notion that immigrants from various countries were biologically ill-suited for American society. He emphasizes that people adapt to new environments, and that cultures change and evolve through contact between different peoples. Thus, cultural diversity is not necessarily a problem. Furthermore, he argued that every culture should be understood within its own context, rather than being compared according to a scale of "development." He developed the idea that a culture should be studied based on its own internal values and logically imply that a society should not be judged solely by the standards of our own society. Ultimately, the customs, beliefs, and ways of life of any given person make sense within the context of that people's own history.

The anthropologist in question challenged the racist and evolutionist ideas of the nineteenth century, which claimed that human societies had progressed through successive stages of development, from primitivism to civilization. He also demonstrated that the languages of different peoples are neither “primitive” nor “simpler” than others; rather, each language possesses its own distinctive structure and complexity.

As an anthropologist, he also studied religious beliefs not in a theological or metaphysical sense, but as human cultural products, viewing them as the means by which societies make sense of the world, nature, and human relationships. Boas believed in the biological unity of humanity, the equality of cultures, and the necessity of understanding each society according to its own history and internal logic.

He likewise viewed culture as a historical and social process, in which stability does not imply an absence of change, but rather a culture's capacity to preserve its identity and fundamental patterns while adapting to new circumstances. This perspective is essential to modern anthropology, as it emphasizes cultural relativism and the significance of historical context in the study of human societies. For this reason, education must take into account individual differences as well as the social and cultural conditions in which a child grows up. According to him, education should foster independent thinking, rather than relying solely on the memorization and mechanical repetition of knowledge. Boas’ views education as an essential tool for cultivating individuals capable of independent judgment and an understanding of cultural diversity. He presents education as a process profoundly shaped by culture, environment, and experience, rejecting the notion that human capabilities are determined exclusively by biological factors. His approach emphasizes the importance of an education that develops the individual in a well-rounded manner, preparing them to participate actively and critically in society.

Boas also examines the relationship between modern societies and cultures often labeled as "primitive." He challenges the evolutionist perspective that all human societies follow the same developmental trajectory, from primitive forms toward modern civilization. In his view, cultural differences cannot be explained by ranking societies along a hierarchical scale of development. Therefore, the modern way of life does not necessarily represent a higher level of human development. (Boas. (1926). Antropologjia dhe jeta moderne.).

Another significant idea of his is that even modern societies retain customs, beliefs, and patterns of behavior inherited from the past. This demonstrates that the distinction between the "modern" and the "primitive" is not absolute. Traditional elements can continue to influence modern life, while different cultures may change and adapt in various ways. By promoting a critical and relativistic approach to culture, Boas emphasizes that no society should be judged solely by the standards of another. Anthropological study should aim to understand cultural diversity and the historical processes that have shaped the various ways of human life. One of his most important messages is that there are no "less developed" languages. He argues that a language lacking a writing system is not inherently "poorer"; every language possesses complex rules, and the complexity of a language cannot be measured by its similarity to European languages. He points out that people labeled as "primitive" did not lack creativity;

rather, they possessed complex and highly developed artistic systems. Thus, according to him, art should not be understood as a scale ranging from 'low' to 'high,' but rather as a cultural means of expressing the world and values of a society. For him, art is not merely an individual expression; it is an integral part of social life. An artistic object can reveal a family's status, a group's identity, relationships with ancestors, or religious beliefs. Boas examines how artists employ forms, symmetry, rhythm, color, and stylization. He demonstrates that artistic forms are often not simply copies of reality, but are instead linked to myths, religious beliefs, rituals, and social organization. Boas challenges the notion of a universal path of artistic development, in which western art is presented as the pinnacle of progress. He argues that every culture possesses its own aesthetic principles, what one society deems beautiful depend on its specific traditions and values, and that a work of art must be understood within the context in which it was created (Boas, 1926, Antropologjia dhe jeta moderne.).

Similarly, according to the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, the term "primitive" should not be interpreted as "backward" or "less intelligent." He used the term to refer to societies that, at the time of his research, were classified within anthropology as traditional or non-industrial societies.

Malinowski posits that people in "primitive" societies possess organized social systems, norms, and institutions; they hold practical knowledge and employ rational methods to address everyday challenges. They have institutions such as family, marriage, religion, the economy, and political structures, that serve specific functions. Such societies are not at a "lower stage" of human development; rather, they must be understood within the framework of their own culture. This aligns with Malinowski's theory of functionalism, which holds that to understand a culture, an anthropologist must examine the function that each custom or institution serves within the life of that society. Malinowski states that the "primitive" is not an inferior human being, but rather a member of an organized society in which institutions and beliefs serve concrete functions in fulfilling the needs of the individual and the community. (Malinowski. (2024). Magjia, shkenca she religjioni.).

The sacred as a "primitive" dimension that retains its freshness and ongoing relevance at all times

In addressing the relationship between the sacred and the primitive, it is particularly important to consider the thought of Mircea Eliade, who offers a significant perspective on how traditional, religious humanity experiences time, reality, and the manifestation of the sacred. According to Eliade, traditional humanity does not experience time merely as an irreversible, chronological line divided into the past, present, and future. Rather, this temporal experience is also characterized by a cyclical dimension, in which foundational events can recur and be relived through rituals. Thus, there is a continuous movement between the beginning and its repetition: the beginning is ritualized, repeated, and rendered present once again. A telling example is the ritual associated with a sacred date, which in Eliade's interpretation can be understood as a symbolic renewal of the cosmos, a return to the primordial moment of creation. In this sense, the world is not experienced solely as a reality moving toward the future, but also as a reality capable of renewal through a ritual return to its origins (Eliade, 2019, E shenjta dhe profania.).

Another fundamental concept in Eliade's thought is 'hierophany', a term derived from the Greek words hieros (sacred) and phainein (to appear), which denotes the manifestation of the sacred through a concrete reality. In this process, an object that is considered profane in everyday life becomes a bearer of sacred significance. Thus, a stone may be transformed into an object of veneration, a mountain into a sacred site, a tree into a cosmic symbol, water into a symbol of purification and rebirth, and light into a symbol of the divine. While the object does

not cease to be what it is in its physical aspect, for the traditional, religious individual, it acquires a dimension that transcends its ordinary function and meaning. It is precisely here that the importance of the concept of hierophany lies for understanding Eliade's approach: the sacred is not necessarily detached from the material world; rather, it can manifest within it and become something that can be experienced.

Conversely, modernity has developed a progressive philosophy of history, which rests on the idea of a linear movement from the past toward the future and, in many instances, on the assumption that this movement necessarily implies improvement. However, İbrahim Kalın questions this identification of historical development with human progress. From this perspective, a society may make significant strides in technology, production, transport, communication, medicine, and administration, without necessarily advancing in terms of justice, wisdom, morality, the meaning of life, its relationship with nature, or respect for others. Therefore, technical progress cannot automatically be considered synonymous with human progress. This approach also serves as a basis for criticizing the belief that human history follows an inevitable and universal trajectory toward the modern model of civilization.

Kalın's critique of modernity, however, should not be understood as an unconditional rejection of it, nor as a call for a romantic return to the past. His argument is more complex, as it seeks to examine the metaphysical, ethical, and anthropological consequences of the modern project. Modernity has brought about the development of rationalism, science, technology, individualism, secularism, industrialism, urbanism, the modern state, and new economic forms. Yet, alongside the opportunities they have created, these processes can also be accompanied by the reduction of the human being to an economic subject, the instrumentalization of nature, materialism, consumerism, hedonism, the fragmentation of meaning, and the weakening of the metaphysical dimension of existence. In this context, Kalın's concern relates not merely to what modernity has achieved, but to what may have been lost during this process. Consequently, he advocates for a critical re-evaluation of the philosophical foundations and the ethical orientation of modernity (Kalın, 2023, 'Barbarë, modernë, të qytetëruar'.).

Following this discussion, another issue of conceptual significance arises. Here, I would also like to address how the term "ignorance" (jahiliyyah) should be understood within Islamic civilization. Does this term imply a primitive state in a chronological and historical sense, or does it refer to a primitiveness that manifests in ideas, mindsets, moral judgments, social relations, and the way others are treated? This question becomes particularly meaningful when we consider the reality of pre-Islamic Arab society. In that society, there were individuals who held significant political roles, led military structures, engaged in sophisticated commercial activities, and excelled in art, music, and poetry. In other words, this was a society that cannot simply be described as underdeveloped in organizational, economic, or cultural terms. Nevertheless, development in these areas did not preclude the existence of discriminatory mindsets, prejudices, and social hierarchies based on tribal, linguistic, or ethnic affiliation.

At this juncture, Fazlur Rahman's interpretation of pre-Islamic Meccan society offers an important perspective. Rahman does not treat jahiliyyah (ignorance) merely as a lack of knowledge or intellectual capacity, but rather as a state of moral and social disorder. One of the central issues he identifies concerns wealth, inequality, and a lack of social responsibility. The Meccan elite had developed a mindset in which wealth was perceived primarily as absolute, individual property, while the poor and vulnerable strata were not seen as possessing any moral or social claim upon the wealth of the affluent. In this context, the religious message and the divine dimension intervened as a challenge to this order, calling for the construction of a social structure rooted in justice, solidarity, and moral equality. In Rahman's interpretation, the problem with Meccan society did not lie in an absolute lack of intelligence, knowledge, or practical skill. On the contrary, this society demonstrated considerable aptitude in commercial activity, economic and political organization, and social

relations. The fundamental problem was the decoupling of human knowledge, intelligence, and abilities from an ethical orientation and moral responsibility. In other words, material and intellectual development was not necessarily accompanied by an equivalent moral development. This is one of the points where the concept of ignorance or jahiliyyah, takes on a significance that transcends the boundaries of a specific historical period (Rahman, 2010, Islam.).

By interlinking these perspectives, one could argue that the sacred and the traditional should not be understood merely as elements of the past or as remnants of an early stage of human development, and certainly not as 'primitive' features. On the contrary, they can be viewed as a critical and normative dimension that consistently challenges forms of moral primitivism, regardless of a society's level of technological, economic, or institutional development. In this sense, jahiliyyah (a state of ignorance or moral darkness) is not necessarily a category confined to a single historical epoch; it can manifest in various forms even within modern societies, whenever knowledge is severed from ethics, power from responsibility, wealth from justice, and material development from human dignity.

Therefore, it can be posited that the sacred and the traditional represent an ongoing endeavor to lead humanity and society away from a primitive mindset toward a more ethically advanced and humane order. This endeavor is not strictly bound by historical chronology, as the need for justice, wisdom, solidarity, and moral responsibility remains ever relevant. Precisely for this reason, the sacred retains its vitality not by denying time or historical change, but by continuing to provide criteria through which they can be evaluated. Ultimately, a society may be modern in technological and institutional terms yet remain primitive in its mindset and human relations. Thus, the challenge that the sacred and the traditional or, in other words, the 'primitive' poses to humanity is not merely to progress through time, but also to advance in the moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of existence.

Conclusion

Primitivism should not necessarily be understood as a phenomenon confined to the past, but rather as a persistent conceptual problem that continues to shape and challenge the ways in which societies understand themselves and others. The anthropological critique of cultural evolutionism, advanced by scholars such as Franz Boas, together with Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the underlying structures of human thought, provides a framework for questioning the presumed equivalence between cultural difference and cultural inferiority. Nevertheless, it remains essential to investigate whether hierarchical modes of thinking continue to operate within the domains of knowledge production, intercultural relations, and moral evaluation. From this perspective, the contemporary relevance of the concept of the "primitive" lies not in the existence of societies that could legitimately be classified as primitive, but in the possibility that our own conceptual and evaluative frameworks continue to reproduce hierarchies of cultural difference and generate new forms of primitivization.

Thus, the categories of the "developed" and the "primitive," as applied to the evaluation of human beings and societies, continue to coexist in the contemporary world. Rather than denoting distinct historical stages, these categories reflect different levels and forms of development in human thought, ideas, understanding, behaviour, and modes of action.

The present study is not concerned with technological development or technological primitivism as such; rather, it focuses on the development or persistence of primitive patterns of human mentality, thought, understanding, cultural orientation, and consciousness.

In this context, Ibrahim Kalın's critique, which seeks to restore the philosophical dimension to the debate on civilization, offers an important conceptual framework. It reminds us that civilization cannot be reduced merely to technological advancement, rationalization, economic

development, or the domination of nature. Instead, civilization should be understood as a comprehensive human project encompassing the ways in which individuals and societies conceive of being, knowledge, morality, beauty, social existence, and their relationship with nature.

From this perspective, sacred tradition emerges as an alternative source of reflection on the meaning of civilization. It opens up the possibility of conceiving a model in which the material dimensions of human progress are integrated with the ethical, spiritual, and ontological dimensions of human existence.

It would be epistemologically untenable to maintain that, in this context, the "primitive" belongs exclusively to the past. Such an assumption would prevent us from adequately understanding the present and, consequently, the supposedly "developed" dimensions of humanity. If the primitive were merely a phenomenon of the past, there would be no individuals, social groups, or societies in the contemporary world whose attitudes and practices could be characterized as primitive. Yet, manifestations of such attitudes and practices can still be observed in various parts of the world.

Conversely, if the primitive had entirely disappeared from contemporary human existence, how could we account for acts of intentional violence, theft, or organized crime? More fundamentally, why would societies need laws, constitutions, and state institutions in the first place? These questions invite us to reconsider the persistence of primitive patterns of thought and behaviour within contemporary social life.

The distinction between the primitive and the developed, therefore, should not be approached through the prism of technological advancement, nor interpreted within an evolutionist or hierarchical framework. Rather, the decisive criterion should be the development of human mentality, intellectual capacities, critical understanding, and cultural consciousness. Such development is reflected, above all, in the capacity to recognize and respect the "Other": their personhood, property, ideas, beliefs, thoughts, ethnic identity, and language, with the same consideration that one expects others to extend to oneself. In this sense, the overcoming of primitivism is not primarily a matter of technological progress, but of intellectual, ethical, and cultural maturation.

References

[1] Boas, F. (2026). Antropologjia dhe jeta moderne. Alphabet J&H: Prishtinë.
[2] Eliade, M. (2019). E shenjta dhe profania. Pika pa sipërfaqe: Tiranë.
[3] Kalin, I. (2023). Barbarë, modernë, të qytetëruar. LogosA: Shkup.
[4] Levi-Strauss, C. (1999). Mendimi i Egër. Dukagjini: Pejë.
[5] Malinowski, B. (2024). Magjia, shkenca dhe religjioni. Alohabet J&H: Prishtinë.
[6] Rahman, F. (2010). Islam. LogosA: Shkup.