Corporeal morality is the antidote to war

Morna Finnegan and Ingrid Lewis

3 Feb 2026

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Is the opposite of war vitality? Thanatos — the death impulse — is consuming the earth through our species, generating ever more violent forms of attack and repression. But Thanatos' other face is Eros. Is the antidote for killing seeded at the heart of the urge to exterminate? What can egalitarian hunter-gatherers teach us about moral systems as bodies? Anthropologists have the capacity to reveal our species' ancient predisposition for embodied morality, our will to health: can we be heard?

`https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjmnJ3P9NU8`

Introduction

Camilla Power: We're going to listen first to the amazing Morna Finnegan.

Morna's a long-term colleague with RAG, who did work with Bayaka people and a beautiful thesis on gender and power. It's a wonderful article, "Politics of Eros", an article that I was just reading to this today, "Dance, Play, Laugh, What Capitalism Can't Do."

She was also co-editor with me on a book on human origins, contributions from social anthropology.

The title tonight, she came up with "Corporeal Morality is the Antidote to War", this seems to me like an incredibly timely occasion or event for what is now happening with people around the world being prosecuted, persecuted and hounded and murdered and massacred by states and governments, not least what's occurring at the moment in the United States, which is grim, a grim kind of opposition or polarisation between what Moana is going to describe to us, corporeal morality, where people can engender true solidarity and the sort of the very opposite of that, the very opposite of what we evolved as human beings to experience.

So I'm going to hand over to Mona, please take it away.

Morna's Talk

Morna Finnegan: Okay, thank you, Camilla.

So basically, the way that we thought we would do this is I speak for 25 minutes or so, maybe half an hour.

And then Ingrid will come in with some really beautiful video footage and kind of develop the discussion through that.

So, I might meander a little bit, but there are a few key ideas I want to pull out and return to and see if I can tie together

In the context of this current culture of war-speak and war morality, I've been thinking a lot about my own desire to study the Bengele, my own interest in learning about egalitarian cultures way back, and putting that together with what I now understand about these types of community.

So I'll start with a quote from James Baldwin, the poet and novelist and civil rights activist. He says,

> The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality.

So the proposal that I want to make and use to open a discussion here is really about conflict and how different groups handle conflict.

But it's not just about the negotiation over sexual politics or the integrity of the collective female body as an end in itself. I want to keep babies and children at the center of the discussion.

When I started my PhD at Edinburgh many years ago, I was interested in hunter-gatherer egalitarianism, but I was particularly interested in the political repercussions of egalitarianism.

So how do people go about resisting domination while never themselves becoming the oppressor? How do you collectively rebut methods of coercion without sliding into retaliatory violence? and then make that the ongoing basis for a society.

What do kids born and raised in these communities look like? So Ingrid is going to show a wonderful ethnographic clip of Benjele women's Ngoku ritual shortly.

When we look at the Ngoku film, all I want to say really, because I know that she'll elaborate on that a lot, but to me, what we're seeing is the posturing of the biological male being held up for the community to witness in the most mortifying and insulting ways. It's like these girls are saying, you don't fool us. We know where sexual colonization ends.

So 20 years ago, when I was starting to research egalitarianism, I was particularly interested in that female edge, I wanted to know what the cooperative mothering and the fierce sexual solidarity and the ritual assertions that you see in the ethnographic literature had to tell us about our own way of culturing children and managing social energy and parenting.

I wanted to know how you maintain such a strong emphasis on personal autonomy hand in hand with what is almost always a very kind of deep communitarian ethos. And of course, this is because I had come myself from a background steeped in violent conflict.

So without being conscious of it at the time, I was really asking if war is the preserve of organized male groups, that state of open armed conflict between these groups, then what can we learn about contexts where we find conflict between groups which is not armed and not fatal, and actually not even finite, ongoing performative conflict.

And around that time I was reading Deleuze and Guattari's book, Nomadology, where they present a kind of distinction between what they call the war machine but in fact, is actually something very different to large-scale state war.

And they describe, I thought it would be interesting to offer their description of this kind of slippery peripheral force that commands the ability to kind of spring up anywhere.

They write, This is war without battle lines, with neither confrontation nor retreat, without battles even, pure strategy.

It is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point.

The movement isn't from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival.

Now, they're clearly referring to guerrilla armies, peripheral fighters, people seeking, groups seeking to undermine state power.

But I thought that that description of another way of using force or power offers a kind of framework for what we see in the Ngoku video, that way of holding space and springing up in unexpected ways.

So I just want to backtrack to a talk I gave at RAG several years ago on contact and embodied morality, where I proposed this concept of corporeal morality.

And I used the polysemic bengele and juntois terms, aquila and nom, respectively, to propose that morality is fundamentally a corporeal element.

So it has to be viscerally experienced in order to remain live.

And this means that to survive, moral systems as living things should stay in flux.

The moment they settle and take a kind of fixed shape, employing law and a whole range of punitive social and emotional economies to achieve their ends, they become I argued then, anti-social, anti-emotion, their primary function being to privatize and administer power.

So when I was tracing out this idea of corporeal morality, what I was really saying is that aquila and nom, these complex polysemic terms used by the Benjeli or the juntois, they're speaking about something else.

They're really forms of collective physical accountability in contrast to obedience-based cultures.

And they indicate social fields that function better without top-down moral codes.

So to me, these are social health in operation as persons.

And here's what's really interesting when it becomes a kind of community generator, a way of actually being in the world, This type of moral action involves something very similar to what Deleuze and Guattari described in another context as a way of opposing large-scale conflict.

So at its most fundamental, corporeal morality is really about the equipoise of forces as a kind of perpetual process.

this pushy, demanding morality that lives very close to the male biological territorial impulse or war morality.

Collectively, bodied accountability is almost like the expectant other to the urge to move aggressively against others.

And I'm suggesting tonight that actually this is a kind of antidote meaning literally a remedy, an anti-toxin or a cure for enshrined violence.

And what I'd like to look at is this fact, the cultures in which corporeal morality is encouraged to flourish from birth onwards are applying the collective body to that latent privatization impulse that underlies and justifies war in so many cases.

So women's coalitionary militancy in these contexts is very much about holding space open.

And I think I saw Darcia might be here tonight.

I remember speaking to her about two years ago about Ashley Montague's beautiful book, Touching, written over 40 years ago, where he talks about that ability to touch, to tune into our own sensory scale, and to employ the full range of our senses and how that opens doorways into different kinds of conversation.

So Montagu wrote in this book, Touching, he says, Where touching begins, there are love and humanity also begin.

within the first minutes following birth.

And he's really pointing in this book to the fact that what happens to babies' bodies early on goes on to have a kind of formative foundational effect on what's going to happen socially and culturally.

that and how important it is to really look at tactile experiences early in a culture and how those are being handled.

Because of one of the course, one of the big tragedies of the capitalist project is the requirement for a recourse to active formal war conducted in this methodical way, not only because the getting and defending of stuff, whether it's territory or resources or power, is an aggressive life-or-death battle, but because capitalist society, for obvious reasons, fails to nurture the potential for action within its citizens.

And David Raber was brilliant on this hemming in by invisible electric fences that happens in modern society.

So you only know they're there whenever you press against them and get the shock.

Graeber says, You could be going into Edinburgh University Library feeling like a very free citizen, but if you try to enter through the wrong turnstile, a guy with the baton is liable to appear, or if not a baton, then certainly a security guard who's going to swiftly make sure that you reverse and adhere to the correct structural lines.

And so in the dance play last paper that Camilla was talking about at the start this evening, I was really trying to point out that that colonizing of energy that happens in capitalist culture, very obviously, is closely connected to war morality and the movement of the alpha male as we see the alpha male turn into a kind of governing force.

And so I think that this is what danced communities, communities where the female procreative body has stayed alive are really achieving.

People are intimate with power, with the potential for action and counteraction, because it's just a core part of the social economy.

Capitalism is a kind of devouring impulse, a deadening impulse.

It seems to be about increase and growth.

But in fact, if we look at the impact of it, we see that it's almost always swallowing its own young in the sense of swallowing the vital and the spontaneous, the laughter and the play and the dance, along with the lands and cultures of lots of other people.

where capitalism is moving in a territorial, defensive way.

Egalitarianism, by contrast, whatever shape it takes whatever mechanisms are used to work it out, is very different.

It's a vitalizing, exciting impulse.

There's a feeling of being slightly on the edge, being invigorated, both within egalitarian settings and in the study of how they play out.

strategically.

So you find the life force of the young drawn on in a different way in egalitarian cultures.

The relationship with the land is intimate and dynamic.

Culture is actually made and stored in the body, in persons.

So you get this sense of movement, this molecular feeling of possibility.

And of course, that's often really hilariously fleshed out by various trickster figures or the antics of spirits.

So, I mean, let's be clear that egalitarianism, as I was arguing in my thesis 20 years ago, and as Camilla or Ingrid have both argued, isn't something that women's groups are simply benefiting from, it's the whole point of their coalitions.

Women are working right at the energetic frontier, producing egalitarian relationships, using their bodies, their voices, their blood, their sweat.

And we'll see that shortly.

And the question is, why? So I wanted to read a very short quote from a Palestinian-American poet, Hala Alyan.

which is a kind of reply to the question of why women would invest so much energy within their cultures, Benjele women, Baikal women, generally, in this constant vigilance, this dance that they perform.

She says, When you are eradicating children, you are cutting off the story just as it's starting to be told.

And in the assault on elders, you are eradicating the history, the memory, the archive.

When you decimate the universities, you blow up the libraries, you get rid of the poets, the journalists, anyone who holds a kind of collective memory, you're acknowledging that stories matter, memory matters.

It is a systematic intention to do this, and what you are left with are fragments.

And so we have to do something with the fragments.

And this was in a Guardian article that she wrote referring to what she was witnessing happening to Palestinians, to children in particular.

And she was witnessing as a mother and as a thinker.

I started to think back to the lines of women that I have been so shaped by seeing at Mboule, even though it was a very brief encounter, that those vibrant images of women dancing, painted, beaded, in this aesthetic were the signs of mature reprodigation, productivity are actually signifying beauty and authority.

Just stamping out their kind of rhythms, linking arms, singing in that hair-raising polyphony, and then the corresponding men's line, also drawing energy out of the collective male body, stamping it back across the space.

I was thinking that the great achievement, and it's something that I've come back to and said again and again, the great achievement in that kind of corporeal dance or corporeal negotiation over moral conduct is that there are no winners and therefore there are no losers.

So when groups of men get together, especially in ritual contexts, there's a lot of muscle, a lot of physical power.

In order for that energy not to become too loud, too dominant, you need a counter voice.

You need a counter force, equally loud, equally compact, asserting power in its own way.

And when you set these two bodies in motion, working on each other in a continual *** for tat and motored along by dance and song and drums and that raucous, community laughter that keeps the prospective bully in check.

Power actually becomes a live element.

It never gets a chance to settle in any one set of hands.

And so you have equality without sameness.

And I mean, really, before I became a mother myself, before I had the experience of becoming a mother, I always had the power to pull myself back in and seal up the exits.

You know, I was always able to think about myself as a kind of discreet entity.

But after the birth of my daughter, that was gone.

My body was no longer my body.

This idea of ownership had evaporated.

Babies just don't permit us to privatize ourselves in the way that we're accustomed to without doing them violence.

And so I started to think about myself in the early years when I had my daughter in a sling on my hip all the time as the mothership.

Everywhere I moved in the world, there was this other profoundly dependent body.

She fueled herself through me, she landed on me, she rested in me.

She orbited me through consciousness at sleep.

And the great revelation of Bakhtin to me at that time, just in case Camilla thought I had gotten through a talk without mentioning Bakhtin, is that he gives that shocking openness of maternity a deep political twist.

What you see in the writing of Bakhtin is really this alternative order this kind of body that's archetypal, and it's coming up as the kind of mutable, bloody, irreverent body of the hag mother, signaling the ability not only to open, to trespass, to double and triple, but actually also to run counter to that desire to privatize or to colonize or to fence and hem in.

So it's very much a slippery space holding kind of a body that Bactine traces out for us.

So a very vague inkling about all of this, still very much inquit, is what took me off to the Republic of Congo in 2005 with a handful of questions.

How would it feel to be born with a womb in a society proud of its wombs? How would it feel to be born in a society in which mothers are publicly, collectively powerful? What would it feel like to grow and develop as a body self regarded by the community as a powerhouse? What would it be like to live in a culture, and this is having come from North Armagh, what would it be like to live in a culture premised on love? And I'm not talking about the kind of the love of the celebrity couple.

I'm talking about the fierce, visceral love between children and the bodies that bear them.

And then between children and the communities that bear them or the societies that bear them, going back to James Baldwin, the children are all of ours.

That kind of primal love that you get every time you smell your kid's scalp or kiss the V in his throat.

This is a love I felt then and still feel that has an enormous kind of boil of energy under it, if it could be harnessed in the way that so many Bayaka communities harness it.

A love so blunt and deep that it terrifies patriarchy, I'm convinced of that, which has only been able to colonize the cultural landscape by severing its tongue.

There's no public language for this kind of love, right? It remains unelaborated on a socio-political level.

It's not shaping policy.

It's not governing global politics.

Politics, as we understand it, and at the highest levels, is still a game played largely by privileged men, most of them white.

They might let you play, but it's their game.

So what is this other thing? this slippery creature that's been relegated to the domain of emotionality and domesticity, this complex that belongs to the body and on a political systemic level to the world's egalitarian hunter-gatherers.

Because we're talking about a system here, it's important to point out that once this reaches a cultural level, it's not about individuals.

It's not about biology.

Everyone benefits from it.

The flooding of the socio-political domain with images of female reproductivity held in check by similar images stressing the vigor and skill of hunters or the role that men have in growing babies creates a general vibe where a relationship, desire, and that intense parental love become the tropes.

They become the principles by which people live.

And I've argued that they indicate a radically different type of system to that with which we're familiar.

When we watch war unfolding, we're watching the alpha male in action.

And I think that's pretty self– that that's pretty evident.

So I was looking at the Allian article And she points out, she points to the press conference in 2023 when Palestinian children, who were then being bombed and burned and starved under the gaze of the world, held this press conference in which they said, We invite you to protect us.

And they might as well have said, We invite you to become human.

We invite you to become cultural.

That was the plea that was being made at the time.

And that is, I think, probably the most powerful statement that the children could really have made at that point.

And so to finish off, And knowing that Ingrid's going to carry on this discussion, I just wanted to circle around again to say that an obedience-based culture under war morality, and my children have gone through school as I did.

So we know that in standard education practice, one of the first things that we learn is to be obedient.

We learn about hierarchy.

We learn that we'll speak when we're permitted to speak.

And in many cases, we'll go to the toilet when we're allowed to go.

That's just the standardization within schools.

And from those foundations and from the foundations, particular kinds of child rearing practices, we come to the conclusion that resolving antagonism is really about, the attempt to resolve antagonism is really about seeing duality not as a conversation, but as a permanently closed door.

So morality is placed outside of us.

That's what I'm trying to say.

Morality or moral conduct becomes a code that we will defer to against our true kind of chaotic or brute nature.

But that perception, The whole foundation running under that perception is premised on the prerogatives of the alpha male.

And so what I've been trying to really stress tonight and what I've tried to outline in other, in articles and previous talks is this point that the privatization of reproductivity has prevented us all from accessing a fund of emotional physiological, ritual intelligence

that flows from the maternal body and which we all need access to in order to live rich, connected lives.

So this has been a bit of a meandering walk through some touching on some ideas about the political power of the maternal body and the relationship between fertility and power.

And I've asked this question before, but I thought I would just finish on it.

I'd finish on this note.

If the female body was reinserted into culture, so this is just one to throw out into the discussion space.

What shape and resonance might our collective story take? If the voice of the child were given air, how might the plot line open? and the words begin to jiggle.

We're not designed even on the most basic chemical level, of course, to live as automatons.

As the result of millions of years of evolutionary refinement, we carry in us all those other bodies that went before, all their hours of surviving and loving and straining to protect their young.

But to me, as a mother and as an anthropologist these days, Maybe most painfully, as I go about my daily life trying to survive and achieve what I need to achieve and take care of my own children, is James Baldwin's truth, which I started with and I'd like to finish with before I hand over to Ingrid.

The children are always ours, every single one of them all over the globe, and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality.

The title for this evening, Corporeal Morality is the Antidote to War, is in many ways a challenge to look at what's under corporeal morality, what's nestled within it and why it really is a question of survival, that we come up with different kinds of stories, different kinds of narratives, and different ways of telling them, and that we bring that out into a loud public, a loud public voice, because it's really, to me, and I think, probably to everyone here tonight. It's urgent.

So over to you, Camilla.

Ingrid's Talk

Camilla Power: Thank you so much, Mona. It was absolutely beautiful, and so urgent, as you say.

So Ingrid, wonderful Ingrid Lewis, who has spent many long years being educated and learning from and she's going to be telling us about that experience and showing us some of that experience that Morna's already been speaking about.

Ingrid Lewis: So first of all, thank you so much, Mona. As usual, absolutely wonderful, amazing, brilliant talk.

I will continue from where you left off.

That was true. We need different, we need ancient, We need ancestral narratives to put the female body, the reproductive body, at the center of society.

And having lived with the Benjele, an egalitarian society, they aren't simple or primitive as hierarchical societies would like us to believe.

To the contrast, Benjele society is highly sophisticated, it's visceral, and it's embodied. The Benjele to this day use four different strategies to assure the continuity of an egalitarian society.

They use Musambo, which is public speaking, typically done in the morning and in the evening, where people can air their grievances or share ideas and implant new ideas.

They use gano. These are song stories. They happen often around the campfire, at night. They tell fables, just like we read to our children, and stories of ancestors that tell you of certain behaviors that are good.

Then there is moajo, which is brilliant. It's hilarious and mercilessly teasing, an enactment of certain behaviors by members of the group to educate all about desirable behavior and maybe show up some undesirable behavior, but always with the intent of the benefit of all.

And then there is the activity of masana. Masana is a word that describes from children's games and play to adult rituals, everything. And singing here is a very central part.

The Bengele style of singing is polyphonic, and it predates the Neolithic Revolution. So it's probably the most distant echoes that we have of our ancient ancestors.

It's playful, and it's a playful encouragement of what is seen as right and moral behavior through mockery, entrainment, and enchantment, rather than through instructions of the mind.

The Benjeles sing to recreate society periodically and cyclically.

They sing to celebrate abundance, they sing to initiate girls and boys into ideal relationships of a society, and they sing to educate about correct moral and sexual conduct.

During Masanaj, there is sort of an opposition, or if you'd watch it from the outside without speaking the language, you think, oh, what is this? But there is an interdependence that unifies the men and women in there in sort of a creative tension.

The interplay of assuming a power and then immediately relinquishing it to the other gender.

must be really clearly understood when you are watching the footage.

Women are particularly forthright in reinforcing this gender equality and taking power just to give it back again by humorously mocking men's sexual desires.

By that they are teaching the men how to approach a woman with respect. And men have to sit quietly and just simply watch.

> Initiated girls are sent to announce to the camp that ngoku will soon come out to dance. All women are called to join.

> Initiated girls lead the women from their secret area of the forest. They enter the camp as one. ...

So what do we see? What did we experience? You can see that very young children take part. You can see that there is one man sitting there not smiling. You can see that one man is sitting there smiling very widely. You can see that conveyors especially displaying this harassment behavior in front of the man who is not smiling because he does do that.

You can see that the girls continue their masana until they are satisfied that every single boy in the camp is watching it, is aware of it, and has taken it in. Women teach men through mocking them at very regular intervals during this masana, they sing, You think you're so great, but all your pianist does is give birth to we, behave and make love rather than fuck around, and so on.

Benjele children learn about their sexual conduct from these performances. Girls learn how to deal with male sexuality and harassment. Boys learn how to perform or how to approach female sexuality respectfully.

So I was initiated into the Benjele women's ancient knowledge of Ngoku, the knowledge of what it means to be a woman, the knowledge of reproduction and birth.

I returned to the UK after living with the Benjele in the forest for three years, and little did I know how much this initiation would impact my work back in the UK.

Women kept coming to me for issues regarding their reproductive health, so I learned. I became painfully aware just how prevalent harassment, domestic and sexual violence are in our society. One in four women I see has been raped, and too many women suffer in silence because they lack this female collective body support protecting them.

Modern industrial society rewards and promotes power-hungry, greedy alpha males to assert their power without consideration of all this suffering they are causing. The wars they wage bring unnamable suffering, rape and death as we are seeing worldwide.

At one point in our evolution from great apes to humans, the alpha male was overthrown. If we did it once, can we do it again? We ask 'but how?' I'll show you now a clip of how Mbenjele women use the threat of a sex strike to rein in men misbehaving.

In 2019, so I've been working in the Congo since 22 years, the women did an amazing and beautiful Ngoku Masana, after which the young men wanted to take over the central space for sure.

Sure, admittedly, is an absolutely beautiful dance of male masculinity and performance. So they started to move the women away.

They had drunken Golongolo, which is a maze schnapps, a very strong alcohol, and they became very unruly and started to insult girls' genitals. The women were outraged.

The boys smashed then a glass bottle against the tree where we women were all standing. And I was furious because I already saw myself stitching up all those broken feet.

The women were even more furious, and Kombea, the same woman you saw there, showing the harassment, stood up and told all the women to take their eneke, which is their genitals, away and leave the men with mapombe.

Now, mapombe is a fruit, a hard fruit with a soft center, that the men copulated with before they met women, discovered women. And it has a sharp edge, so it's not very desirable.

So this sex strike really panicked the men. Now, before I could whip out my camera, I mean, it was a moment I had been sort of waiting for and I was like stunned she was saying it. She was saying it out loud there to all the women and all the women reacted. So forgive me for having given just a few words in the beginning of the clip, but the rest is self-explanatory.

> **Kombea:** Women, get up! Take your eneke, let's leave! We are finished here. Today it's finished & you do what?
>
> **Man [talking to Kombea]:** The power of all is only in you, it's us who have to clear up this mess. Today, the boys dance in the cold. Stay, we teach the boys. You are the true, real owners of life. We clear this up. Stay, you will see this today.
>
> **Man [talking to the other men]:** Men behave!

So at this point, the women started to move away, saying that they will leave the men to their mapombe. That their eneke, which is their genitals, will now be leaving. And you see the reaction of the men.

The men– this one man, which I didn't or didn't manage to catch on my camera, said, "sunda kamuyi", which means diminish the fire in your belly, your anger, [then to Kombea] we do know that life starts inside of you.

And she said, no, we are leaving. And she insisted, insisted, until the men turned around. They took the young men, and they told them what to do.

Combea taught the young girls how to deal with such an insult. You name it, and you leave.

Without women, there is no life. The men know that. And they help to educate the unruly youth so that this behavior stops immediately before it can become dangerous.

Women's solidarity with each other is the key to nurturing moral behavior by men to women.

We can see these principles of female solidarity working through the collective body as an active way to reclaim power by rejecting dominant males.

In industrial society, we have seen the power of the collective body when women have come together to expose abuse. As in the Me Too movement, the movement of Women, Life, Freedom, and now in the women coming together to expose Epstein and friends long-term abuse of girls and women.

It can be done. It can be done anywhere and everywhere when people come together as one in one body.

This is what the Benjele women say Ngoku takes, it doesn't need any clothes. It doesn't need any costume. It takes its place in the combined clump bodies of women.

When you're watching the performances of a jengi, you will see that a jengi is a very phallic clothed genie or spirit.

The men make a horseshoe shape around it and they have to keep a jengi away from the women because if a jengi touches the women, they say, they will bleed to death.

And so it takes the corporate that the women's coalition together as one body they enter the camp and claim the camp and the men to keep keep this let me name it the rogue penis away so that this alpha male structure can never again claim any authority.

So, I would actually like to finish with this and um open the floor for discussion and questions together with Morna.

Camilla Power: Thank you so much. That was that was a historic film you showed us. That was something very special.

Audience questions

Audiance member #1: Ladies, thank you. That was a brilliant series of discussions. However, we don't live in hunter tribal societies. We live in a crazy, patriarchal, capitalist, phallocratic nuclear optic upon society. So the idea that the Me Too movement is ever going to cure the problems of several centuries of patriarchal capitalist imperialism, that's a pipe dream and a mistake.

So the question is, what are the real street level, what I would call ultra-Jacobin means of utterly dismantling all rampant, biocratic semen-injectionist nonsense? Creating our, what you might call, polysapphic Shakti, life creative Society?

Ingrid Lewis: Thank you for this question. When people come together, change is made. Slavery would never have been abolished by people asking nicely. People have to ask loudly.

The Me Too movement, Rose McGowan, who flagged it up alone, she couldn't do anything. It was when the other women came forward that actually change happened.

It is when people come together, and that is what we mean by this.

When women are again put at the center of society... Look, we are walking this earth because of women giving birth. If we are nurturing, if we are nourishing this society and not pushing like patriarchy does, children at the bottom of society and the elders at the bottom of society. But when we make this the central space, change can happen. Respect and people coming together can make that change.

We see it at the moment of patriarchy being actually torn down. Yeah, they did show us the sex strike, some commenter just said. You know, Epstein, it's not this Epstein's scandal. This is all the rich and powerful who have been created society with this alpha male right at the top. And it's being promoted as the best way of being in society. This is what needs to stop and what we need to tear down for change to happen.

Morna: Yeah, it's always the question.

I think because we are enclosed in this, we're enclosed in a kind of framework or a mindset, which I don't know who asked the question.

I'm sorry, I didn't get the name, but You were saying, how do we kind of achieve this dramatic, instantaneous change sweep all this **** off the table and replace it with something healthy and human? And I agree, but actually, that's not what the Benjelli are necessarily doing.

There's just a little bit more like what Ingrid was saying, I think, There's this constant humming and churning and chipping away at the ego of the alpha male, the potential alpha male, not necessarily embodied by any one person, although sometimes an individual does embody it, but it's just this constant hum of activity with the concern for the inviolability of women's bodies, but also for the inviolability of children's bodies.

I think the more that we start to form coalitionary groups in our society around those types of principles and based on those types of actions, the more you will see things turning, whether that happens in a a large scale and dramatic enough way to counter the — because it's like the alpha male has snowballed, as we see. But so easily, you can puncture that big bubble so easily.

And there's something about what those girls are doing. I think we have to take the lesson from societies in which we have that organic, revolutionary, militant force playing out all the time.

There's something about the mockery. There's something about the humor, the parody, and the turning their backs on the ability to turn their backs on the rampaging male and say, Okay, we're out of here. Take your cunts and let's go. Nobody gets this.

Ingrid was just saying yesterday If we can find ways to turn this into a cultural narrative, if we can find ways to bring that kind of parental sensual impulse out into the culture.

And it's really a case of using our imagination, using our energy, getting together as collectives, putting in the effort to collectivize when we're all so immersed in our own attempts at survival in this insane system that we are forced to live through, just saying the emperor has no clothes on, in any way possible.

Ingrid Lewis: I think we feel powerless. It's like with the climate change question we are We are going towards the abyss and people often say, oh, but what can we do? It's all the big corporations. We have no power. We have a lot of power in those spaces that we have influence over.

If we are going back to the corporeal body of women and sexual violence, for instance, you are now here at university. University is clearly a space where young people come together and there is a lot of sex. And we have to talk about sex because sex is at the very beginning of life.

We are here because two people have made love and because of women giving birth to children. Now, if there is a rogue penis, if one woman will just suffer this in silence

and not speak to her fellow students, then this rogue male will go rampant and maybe become once one like an orange idiot.

But if women come together and talk about it, if they really form a coalition, then this can be stopped in its origins.

The Benjele women, for instance, if a man is a good hunter and he comes back with some meat, then everybody is very happy and he will be praised. But the moment that his ego rears its ugly head and he starts to boast, 'yeah, I brought you a pig and I'll bring you two antelopes tomorrow', the moment that happens, you know what the women do? They will refuse to take a share of that meat and cook it. They won't eat it because they say it's bad meat. So they level society quite in a sophisticated way.

We could also use a similar refusal to those people where we see an ugly ego rearing up its head and make just the difference in the spaces that we inhabit, that we live in. And start there.

The moment we start small, it becomes bigger. There was always one person that started off a movement. And when other people see it's easy, they can come in.

Camilla Power: Thank you for those.

Audiance member #2: So just following off what Andrea just said about like, what do we do? And I noticed that when you kind of responded and it was true that you can't really just ask someone politely to kind of get their foot off our neck, but I think.

Where do you feel like violence has a place in the kind of revolution, really? Because I know that egalitarian society, correct me if I'm wrong, and I think violence is very much like a common thing, but with where we're at right now, how dire the situation where do you feel like violence is appropriate? Because I think about, you made reference to the slave rebellions, they weren't peaceful, even though they weren't asking politely, there was violence there, and that was the only way that was really going to change things.

Then the second part of the question was about women coming together. How do we manifest women coming together when we also have to deal with like very real socioeconomic factors where the government has made it so much that we rely so heavily on them?

Protests I think are a form of privilege as well. Not everyone has the means to kind of disconnect from it and like not kind of give into the system and perpetuate it.

So yeah, those are my two questions.

Ingrid Lewis: I'll give a comment to your first question with a comment that came in the chat.

Notably, the US commentator academic Heather Cox-Richardson has been observing that the collective Minnesota populace has forced the Trump-Miller dominance effort back down.

And the last big Jamaican slave rebellion in 1831 began as a labor strike.

and was only violent when it was confronted.

So in Minnesota, what we saw there is this is a peaceful protest.

This is a peaceful coming together in great, great, great numbers.

So I'd also mark it with the words that I once heard when I was in Rwanda just before the genocide.

We met a woman whose husband had been terribly tortured and killed.

One of her sons had his arms hacked off and rat poison put in it and had died.

And her last remaining son sat next to her with a very big oozing wound on his head when I asked to attend to it.

And in my head when she recounted that, I had that mayor who had thrown her on the body of her husband already in shackles.

I was so mad.

I was so angry.

She laughed eerily.

And I thought, oh my God she's gone mad with all this grief and all these terrible things that have happened to her.

And she looked me straight in the eyes and she said they can torture us, they can maim us, they can even kill us.

But one thing they can't ever do is make us like them.

So violence is the last resort.

The Benjele women will resist very, very strongly and they will make big displays.

If a man is unruly, if something happens in society and it should come to a fight, they will first of all fight with firewood because firewood is brittle.

And so when you crack that over someone's head, you won't crack their head, but the firewood just makes a big spark everywhere and a big display.

This is, in a way, a power we have.

We can, when we come together, make a big display and a big noise.

And the louder the noise, the better, because then change can happen.

Mona.

Morna: Yeah, I mean, on the question of violence, I, again, it's Are you trying to go for a kind of bloody, radical uprising? Or are you going to use intelligence as a way to uprise the kind of moral intelligence that understands that where societal violence comes into play, the risks are greatest for the most vulnerable, including children.

And so we don't know what a female uprising would look like.

We don't know if we were able to garner that level of solidarity, nationally, transnationally.

We don't know what shape that would take.

We're assuming it would have to be violent.

We're assuming it would have to be armed or there would have to be death.

And maybe that's the case.

But we certainly know that when Benjele women, for example, act to colonize, to overtake the social space.

They're not doing that with violence.

They're doing that using seduction, beauty, musicality, parody, but always with that sharp edge of you don't mess with us.

There's a threat in it.

That's what I'm saying.

There's the threat of action without actually the axe falling.

And having grown up in North Armagh, having grown up in a community that was withstanding state violence, using guerrilla violence, I can tell you it's not necessarily a better approach.

It's still violence.

There's still death.

There's still trauma.

People still come out of it horribly marked.

And we don't start a new culture, ultimately.

I I know very well all the reasons that people have to withstand that kind of military incursion.

But I'm looking for something different.

I'm interested in something different here.

And I think we have to begin with a different language and a different understanding and tell different stories.

And we have to draw different examples from people like the Ben Jelly so that we can say, here's an alternative.

Here's a working organic alternative for how you can uprise without causing harm on a massive scale.

Ingrid Lewis: Without becoming like them.

And just an example before we take Christine's question comes to my mind from India.

When in India there were these series of rapes against young girls that were then found hung in trees, what a community of women did, the elder women, and that is in India, stripped, stopped naked.

And they walked every day in the streets, stark naked, the old women, the grandmothers, and they said, come along then, come along then.

And the violence, what happened to that violence? What happened to the rapes in that community? They stopped.

So there are different ways of using the communal body.

And anyway, just a different example.

Christine: Yeah, the thing I wanted to say is that from my experience of taking part in protests in groups of people and doing performances in groups of people and doing rituals in groups of people, which I've done for many years of my life in this culture.

I, there's something happens when you do those kinds of things where you feel bonded with the people and it stays with you forever.

So I come back I didn't, I used to come to the RAG evening classes and then I didn't come for many years.

Now I come back and I still feel connected with the people.

And so doing things in groups, wherever they are, particularly with groups of women and particularly with groups of people who believe in the same things as you and particularly things that are a bit radical and some form of protest.

They all, it's all part of a picture and I think...

when people are maybe thinking, oh, what can we do to make a difference? Rather than thinking of it from the outside, like, what do you do? How can one little person make a difference? If you think what you can get from it, because going on a protest or performing a ritual or being together with people is mainly a really pleasant experience.

Obviously, there's some things about it that aren't pleasant, but It's just empowering.

And I'd just like to say to everyone that asking these questions, just join in.

Join in with everything that you can that's part of a group.

And perhaps this will be part of it.

Ingrid Lewis: Thank you for that, Christine.

Yes.

Touch.

The Benjeli will always make sure that they touch their bodies.

They say, Sanganjo means mix up your bodies, so when the women enter camp, they enter the camp, as you saw, as one they touch.

Touch already we are exchanging energy.

Touch makes us one and it's something very empowering.

You no longer feel powerless, you no longer feel alone because you have so many like-minded people around you giving you that strength to withstand something that feels like a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

And change can happen.

Minnesota has shown that again one more time.

It is harrowing to watch it.

We have a friend there who tells us it's even far, far worse than what we see in the media.

And yet people are still going out together, protesting together, giving each other strength and helping each other.

And that is the society we wish to see.

So for me as well, violence is not the answer.

Yes, people haven't changed things at times by just asking nicely, will you please stop this and not suppress us anymore? There needs to be loud protest.

But as Mona said, there is a different way of approaching it.

And the more we are in number, the greater the impact.

We've seen it time and time and time again.

Someone says, wasn't there an older woman protesting naked in Nigeria against one of the oil companies? Yes.

Camilla Power: There is a talk I did on African rituals, a rebellion, which had some of covered a lot of this amazing material of women's naked protest.

And that operates within a cosmology and kinship structure where the more the nakedness goes down, the older the woman's body, the more powerful the curse that is threatened.

So the real success of naked protest is to just threaten, a bit like the way the Evangelii worked there. It's just the threat of how far it could go. And the men will say, no, don't.

Just like the Evangeli, when they're ready to take their cunts right out of the camp, no, don't, So it's just that potential that they have. They have that power as Morna and Ingrid have told us, they've got that potential and really the men are not able to oppress them in, trap them into the corner with that. They can't do it.

And just to say about Minnesota there has been so much, and people are making a lot of discussion on Minnesota from what we've been able to see, and yes, there's even more underneath that the woman who is talking about the privilege of protest, well in Minnesota, there is some stuff going on where people who do have the ability to go outdoors are really putting a lot of work into support of those people who are too scared and worried to go out because of what could happen to them because of these ICE agents who are absolute Nazi terrorist machines.

There is such a polarization of what is essentially in Minnesota being reared up, a corporeal morality is being rediscovered there, with slogans about there is no such thing as other people's children, which just reminds me exactly of James Baldwin's words, and those slogans came from the George Floyd protests originally, as I understand.

So there are real penetration there of all the different communities coming together.

And as Alistair was talking about, what is it that these big alpha males with the huge billionaire, trillionaire privilege are threatened by is people saying, no, to work.

No to buying in shops, no to using money, no, just go on a strike, say no in any way you can say no. If everybody does that, it's undermining of capitalism. It's totally undermining and it isn't violent.

Chris Knight: All the revolutions which have succeeded, like the Russian Revolution, for example, were completely non-violent. One person fell off an edge of a post office during the October Revolution.

Camilla Power: There were more people hurt in the films made...

Far more people hurt in Eisenstein's film than in the actual revolution. But of course, that was because it was a huge mutiny by soldiers that didn't want to keep killing each other. And so a vast amount of power was on the side of the revolutionaries.

Any revolution which succeeds will be kind of peaceful because as soon as it starts getting violent things are getting rather badly wrong.

Audiance member #1: That's not quite true. Don't forget the capitalist imperialist powers sought to destroy the Bolshivic Revolution. That's why historians will

describe the First World War as ending in 1919. But that bit of the history of the Great War or the First capitalist civil war for looting. That's always dropped from history now, but it's true that the Germans were thinking, shall we march in and destroy the Bolsheviks in Saint Petersburg? So they may have successfully created an internal revolution, but there are plenty of people slavering to destroy the success of the Soviets, had the Great War, had it continued a little longer...

Chris Knight: Always expect that...

Audiance member #1: But again, let's look at our Palestinian colleagues. They weren't even asking for anything, but they've been exterminated by Zion-Nazi fascists who are the last expression of patriarchal capitalist imperialism.

So, if we know lunatics in charge, in London, New York, you think that they would do that, and our sacred sisters in the Uma, I mean, Francesca Albanese has argued that they've killed hundreds of thousands of people. That's the kind of forces we are opposing.

So, we are facing psychopathic narcissistic, sadistic militarist genocide heirs who are armed with incredible technical power. They make Auschwitz look like a joke. So these people also have nuclear weapons. So the closer we get to disarming each other, the more they're likely to step into an incredible high-speed horror world.

So that's the problem that's always in my mind. How would you take nuclear weapons away from the patriarchal campus-fooing echelons in the Yankee tyranny? This sounds impossible. The system is designed for that not to happen.

Camilla Power: Have you heard any of that, Ingrid and Mona? Have we got more to add to this? I think it's a matter of song, dance, joy, no, sex, down at the bottom of it, even underneath all the class issues. These things need to be collectivized.

I think we're listening to a message about corporeal morality that we evolved as Homo sapiens, even the ancestors of Homo sapiens. This is an ancient story. It's not just this capitalism is a very narrow veneer, shallow veneer here. And we are up against a battle for all of our species because of climate change. And the vast majority of the global south have not been the cause of that climate change. And the vast majority of people have not been guilty of that climate change.

So there is a huge majority here on Earth who have the potential and the and would have the will with, as Morna said, about this visceral parental love of children. How do you get into a future which is so threatened? So we need to recover that, I think is what Morna is telling us.

Morna: I was just noticing that Darcy has posted a couple of things in the chat as well. Darcy is doing some amazing, amazing work with the evolved nest that kind of in some ways speaks back to the last comment as well.

In terms of ground roots, bottom-up communitarian efforts to take this knowledge into people's communities, into people's social forums, and say, actually, there are things that we can do to begin to bring children, bring babies back into the center of the debate.

And the idea of the evolved nest is very much about that.

But I think no matter what you're dealing with here in terms of power and its impact and all the different invisible layers of reinforcement the power uses, ultimately, just like Camilla said, there is the human need to for self-preservation, for survival.

And there's something really deep in each of us.

And even actually in people I know who don't have children, if you can make that a kind of rallying cry, save our children's lives are at risk.

The children's lives are not only at risk, they're being obliterated in various parts of the world.

Are we human beings? Are we cultural? Are we able to act? And you need compelling ways to draw people into those spaces and into those types of actions because capitalism does that.

It makes you sluggish.

It makes you believe that you don't have any power.

You're taught to be good, you're taught to be obedient.

because that's the kind of citizen that capitalism requires, right? And shopping is kind of a way to escape the horror of it all.

So you have to find ways, Christine said this as well, to get yourself physically into contact with other people who are group building and nest building and solidarity building in all kinds of ways, and always with that coming back to that statement that actually you can't kill the kids. You can't kill the babies.

I mean, if we could just somehow find a way to really dance and sing that, to amplify that out into the central cultural spaces, if we could get enough people to actually come behind that.

And I think that That's possible.

I think there has to be enough of an impetus, but I think it's possible and we're there.

We're at the point where it's unbearable not to do that.

There's a turning point where you cannot accept it any longer.

You get over your tiredness, your fear, your embarrassment, whatever it might be, and you get yourself out into public spaces because you can't accept the alternative.

And that's for the parent in all of us, as James Baldwin said. We're fighting for the species against the marauding alpha male who's threatening to swallow the kids. Kronos, he's gonna eat his own kids. We have to act.

So that message just has to get out again and again and again and people have to get together in a tactile way again and again. You're breaking through the layers when you do that.

Here we are all on Zoom, but we all know what I'm talking about.

Camilla Power: Well, some of us are bodily in the room. Maybe we could try to raise a protest at this point. Well, a dance, a song we we're hoping for.

I just wanted to recall the last sentence of Mourner's abstract for this session:

> Anthropologists have the capacity to reveal our species' ancient predisposition for embodied morality, our will to health. Can we be heard?

So we really do have a role responsibility. We've sitting on what David Graber's described as these mountains of evidence of what other cultures have been able to, how they've been able to organize themselves and go beyond violence into levels of egalitarianism that are incredibly sophisticated.

Why can't we tell that story to start with and enact that story as much as we can? As Christine says, engage with things that we enjoy doing, things that are fun. I mean, we've got access to carnival. We've got access to making our bodies speak and dance and sing. We need more education to take that central space by practice. There's nothing else to do except practice and action.

Ingrid Lewis: In the words of the Ashininka indigenous peoples from Brazil, they say, first of all, they ask when they come and visit here, where are your children? It's nice you're here, but where are your children? Don't you have any? And they say; know yourself, have a vision, act on it.

We all know that we are really wanting to save our species from extinction, and we want to have a better future for our children for the next seven generations, for the next how many generations? So we already have visions. Let's act on it together.

Camilla Power: We've had so many contributions from Dan about the evolving situation in Minnesota, which is really extraordinary.

Any more in the room, anybody? Anybody who's not spoken yet, because you've had a lot of voice here.

Audience member #1: May I make one more point, which is about decentering our species morality.

In other words, I don't think it's true that our ultimate moral scheme is to preserve our species.

Camilla Power: No, I don't think that's what I meant, really, because we won't preserve our species without all the species and the biodiversity and the, of course that's true.

Audience member #3: That was a great talk. Thank you, Mona.

I was thinking that in all these conversations about process violence, what is to be done, we spend so much time and energy and vitality thinking about the destruction of the old system that we're not employing that energy, labour, time into the construction of the new system on the margins of capitalism which is something that already exists and that actually if you look at the majority of peoples around the world, they exist in the margins of capitalism already. Even our own experiences here in the imperial core exist within the margins of capitalism.

When you enjoy life with a friend or a lover and you dance and that's not a transactional thing going on, that is already in the margins of it and I think one of the things that Mona was saying is about how Capitalism has this capacity to swallow vitality, to swallow the children, the young, energy, the land.

But I don't think swallowing is actually the right metaphor because what capitalism does is that it positions itself between life and the conditions that make life possible. So it's a mediator of life.

As soon as we manage to break that mediation and to exist and find life and acquire those conditions without the mediation of the logics of capital, it makes more sense to think about vitality and think about construction of a new system.

So the issue is not necessarily, at least to me, how we take away the nukes from the bad people, but it's like, ignore the nukes, ignore the old system and kind of like focus more on the construction of the new one.

I think in particular, like what the Bengeli women were doing to some extent was ignoring active, intentional ignoring of the patriarchal violence in order to construct something else, like a new system that does not need to rely on that as some form of enforcement of morality.

So it makes more sense, at least me, to be looking at the construction of the, to be employing all of our energies and times and hands into the construction of the new system rather than the destruction of the old one, which is not to say that we shouldn't be looking at the structural oppression that exists in today's world.

It's more about when we come into protest and there's this collective affervescence of coming together for a common cause, what is also happening is that we are putting energy and vitality into things that make sense future-wise.

So maybe instead of looking at the past as a way of like construct or utopia, we should be actually redirecting our gaze towards the future in a more intentional way.

Darcia: Hello. This is so wonderful, Morna.

And I really appreciate both of you having such grounded knowledge that the rest of us need to hear about since we can't experience it directly.

I appreciate your films, Ingrid, and it just all is wonderful.

My home state, the place I was born and spent most of my childhood is Minnesota. So I pay close attention to what's happening. My family's there. So I put, people should look up the singing resistance.

There's now a website. I put in the link with 32 protest songs that have been developed. And that's the way, right? The arts are going to save us if we can all get out there and sing and dance and be silly and I don't know about going naked, but that would be something to contemplate.

But we also, I put in the chat, the nestedworld.org.

We've got a nesting ambassador program that we've just launched, and that is to try to envision the future by reinvigorating our ancestral wisdom.

And now all the science is showing how important it is to provide the evolved nest and live in the nest throughout our whole lives.

So I hope anybody who wants to know more about those things will look them up. And thanks again. Wonderful work.

Camilla Power: Thank you, Dasha. You provide so many resources there and so many ideas, as do the people of Minnesota.

I want to say thank you, especially to everybody who came live today, but it actually has worked beautifully over the Zoom. I hope people have appreciated that.

I think thanks to Ingrid and Mona for putting in so, being so eloquent in this discussion and showing us this amazing footage, Ingrid. It's unforgettable. And we didn't know you had such top secret. It's like top, that's our top secret classified footage that with the Bengele women taking their council to eneke away.

This is the glimpse of pre-patriarchy, how precious that is. If it's too easy to think that evolutionary psychology, evolutionary anthropology doesn't know that even exists. But yeah, it does.

That's why our social anthropologists keep bashing away at the kind of evolutionary mainstream, the stuff that's led off by people like Richard Wrangham for instance, thinking that morality was created by gangs of men executing badly behaved men. Yeah, that'll work. That'll really do sexual morality, won't it? I mean, yeah, it sounds like it sounds like, yeah, they did something like that to exactly Epstein, didn't they? Yeah.

Ingrid Lewis: And yet again, it takes all of us doing different and yet complementary things.

So everyone here has contributed by being here, by you, Camilla and Chris, yet again, thank you for providing this space, for the Radical Anthropology participants, for doing this amazing stuff, for all the contribution.

It takes all of us together doing different, but yet complementary things. And that is what will get us there.

Camilla Power: Thank you, Ingrid. That's the way to think of it. Flourish in diversity, absolutely.

Morna Finnegan and Ingrid Lewis
Corporeal morality is the antidote to war
3 Feb 2026

Radical Anthropology. <www.vimeo.com/1161583108>