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1 African Societies

Social anthropologists study the societies of those parts of the world that have not yet experienced the full consequences of the industrial revolution – societies in which people still get a large part of their living from the food they grow themselves and the animals they herd, in which most of them expect the place where they were born to be their permanent home, and rely for co-operation on their kin and neighbours and not on contracts to do jobs for a money wage. There are a number of reasons for making such studies. Perhaps the most general is the argument that you cannot look critically – or even perhaps understand – your own society until you have seen something very different. This has been the experience not only of anthropologists. It was the novelist Somerset Maugham who said that he only began to understand the English after his travels all over the world. Another, and very different, argument is that the anthropologist is the interpreter to his own countrymen, or, if you like, to other 'Europeans' or 'Westerners', of the cultures of peoples alien to them – of the modes in which such peoples communicate, and above all in which they express their common values and desires. This way of study implies a distinction between 'us' and 'them' – the same distinction, in fact, that we draw when we study the language and institutions of another European country. Yet the latter study is not held to be the business of anthropologists. A good many writers today draw the conclusion that anthropology is, and has always been, a 'colonialist' profession and that it is time to 'decolonise' it; and different ways of doing so are suggested.

The way that is advocated by some French writers (Copans et al. 1971) is to look in what they call 'archaic' societies not for the exotic qualities which differentiate 'them' from 'us', but for what we all have in common. This is not as new as they think; it was the excitement of Malinowski's teaching that he was endlessly reminding us of the common features, disguised under different forms, in 'their' societies and 'ours'. This was the core, and the strength, of his functional theory which has now fallen

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into such disrepute. He was never tired of repudiating the idea of anthropology as an interest in the exotic.

There is still room to ask where we are to find these common features. The structuralist followers of Lévi-Strauss find it in the unconscious, unrecognised logical laws which lead men everywhere to classify the objects of their experience in terms of opposites that must somehow be reconciled. Marxists, who also argue in terms of contradictions that must somehow be transcended, see what is common to all societies in the exploitation of their fellows by those who control strategic resources. Less committed anthropologists say that a society could not exist as such unless it had some way of maintaining order among its members, some commonly recognised rules governing the holding and transmission of property and the right to exercise authority, some means of passing on to the next generation its moral values and its accumulated knowledge. This is the point of view from which I am writing. It is 'functionalist' in the sense that one looks in the study of alien societies for *their* way of meeting these essential needs; they are not the needs that Malinowski enumerated, but they would be recognised as fundamental by a good many students of society, 'primitive' or 'modern'. We used to call the analysis of these institutions the study of social structure and that of symbols the study of culture; and the sociological theories of Talcott Parsons in America, which are not without a debt to Malinowski, are still called 'structural-functional' and have by no means been snuffed out by the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss.

This book, then, is intended to illustrate from different African societies what a British anthropologist sees as the most important aspects of a social system from a structural-functional point of view. We must take as our starting-point the fact that the peoples we are dealing with have not had, until they were brought to them from outside, the techniques of production and communication that the industrial world is used to. They belong to what Peter Laslett has called 'the world we have lost', or indeed to an even remoter world, since the sixteenth-century England to which he was referring knew the skill of writing and the use of money. In such a world people have to adapt themselves to their environment rather

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than master it. They cannot travel far, and most of them live where they were born, or, if they leave home when they marry, a few miles away at most. Hence their most significant relationships are with kinsmen and neighbours, and an anthropological study must give more attention to the purposes for which people recognise claims and obligations based on kinship than an analysis of an urban industrial society would be likely to do. Indeed our subject has been described as the study of kinship *par excellence* – something of an exaggeration, even though the nineteenth-century anthropologists did give so much thought to the question of different (often imaginary) forms of family and marriage. Another view is that kinship only begins to have meaning when one asks what political or economic or religious behaviour is considered to be appropriate to people in any given kin relationship. But it remains true that the kin relationships provide the rules for all these types of behaviour.

One of the leading students of kinship, Meyer Fortes, distinguishes between the 'domain' of kinship and that of 'politico-jural relations' – the latter being matters of claims to property or to authority, enforceable by sanctions. Within the family, he would argue, obedience to seniors and to the head of the household grows out of the dependence of its members on them. It is accepted as morally right, and the rejection of family or kin-group norms is not a matter to be dealt with by external authority on the human level; many peoples believe that the spirits of the dead are concerned to maintain it. Outside this moral community there must be some coercive means of supporting recognised rights by securing compensation for wrongs suffered. This is the minimal political function. Some would argue further that there is always some body wider than the kin group which has to take decisions for common action, and to act as a unit in relations with outsiders. This would enlarge the field of 'minimal government'. In many African societies there is no difficulty in recognising an embracing authority system with an individual head, though it may be more instructive to study those with a different organisation for law enforcement and the making of decisions.

Finally, African peoples seek to understand the external world on which they are so much more directly dependent than

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is urban man, whose material needs are all supplied from distant sources. What they cannot themselves control they ascribe to unseen, ultra-human, usually personalised beings whose goodwill they must secure in order to live and prosper, who are concerned with right conduct as their worshippers see it and may punish those who disregard social norms. In addition they may believe that men can obtain, if they know the right formulae and substances, powers beyond the normal to help or harm others. This is the field of religion and magic, the field that symbolism dominates, and that in which the 'translation of culture' has most to say.

First I shall give examples of each of the three main types of subsistence economy: that of the food-gatherers who take their necessities where they find them, that of the herdsmen who rely primarily on their cattle (and other livestock) and that of the cultivators whose main food is a grain crop, though they may herd cattle in addition. Then I shall take different peoples to illustrate different aspects of current theory in its three main fields of kinship, politics and religion, interlinked as they always are in every society.

And what about economics, the Marxist reader is asking. My answer is the same as his. Getting a living is so much the central preoccupation of peoples of simple technology that it is inseparable from any of the aspects of society that I have mentioned.

MODES OF LIVELIHOOD

Only a very small number of people in Africa still live by hunting and gathering wild food, and few if any are now entirely dependent on wild sources. Most of the pygmies of the Congo forests and the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert are attached in serf-like relationships to settled populations on the borders of their hunting grounds, and some Bushmen even have their own settlements under the eyes of their masters, whence they go out on hunting trips for only part of their time. The Hadza of Tanzania have been constantly losing individual members who leave a hunting band to attach themselves to a neighbouring village, and now the government is requiring them to stay in one place and learn to be farmers. An anthropologist,

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Colin Turnbull, lived for some time with a band of Congo pygmies, and my example will be taken from his work.

Most of the nomadic cattle peoples are to be found in the swamps of the upper Nile and the arid country in the north of Kenya and Uganda. The constraint to which they are subject is the need for grazing and water. The whole Nuer population has to move in the dry season to the few sources of permanent water, and back in the wet season to their homes on the few ridges that are above flood level. Other peoples – Jie, Turkana, Karimojong – can leave women and old people in permanent homes where there is enough water for humans, but must send their young men away with the herds in search of grazing. Typical of the cattle peoples is the organisation by age which allots to all the young men collectively the duty of fighting to protect their own herds and raid those of others. My example of a pastoral mode of life will be the Karimojong.

People who practise agriculture – often valuing cattle too – are the vast majority, and there are many differences among them. Much of the soil of Africa, particularly in the centre and east, is so rapidly exhausted that the people who live from it have to move their villages every few years. Elsewhere there are permanent settlements in which every household reckons to have enough land to leave part of it fallow each year. Where this is the case, rights to land are important among the claims of kinship, or holders of political authority may have the right to say who shall cultivate land within their borders. One of the best descriptions of the effects of different ecologies on the way of life of culturally similar populations is to be found in the work of Elizabeth Colson and Thayer Scudder on the Tonga of Zambia, and I shall take them as an illustration, though not with any implications that they are typical; there is no 'typical' African agricultural society.

KINSHIP

Anthropologists conventionally classify kinship systems according to the way in which people reckon descent. Everyone is descended from two parents, and each of them from two, and so on . . . But nobody can know all his ancestors, let alone all his collateral kin, and what is important for a social system

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is who is selected for recognition. In many societies, and in most African societies, people trace their descent *unilineally*, that is through father to father's father, or mother to mother's mother, as far back as they can reckon. Persons linked by either mode of descent form *lineages*, which are the source of rights to inheritance and are sometimes held collectively responsible for debts incurred or offences committed by any of their members; in societies which allow private revenge it is lineage mates who have the right and duty of avenging the death of one of their number. If one is counting heads one can say the majority of Africans are *patrilineal* (tracing descent through males), but if one is counting peoples, the balance is different, because there are a very large number of *matrilineal* peoples, most of them with a small population. Most of these are found in a belt stretching across Africa and including a large part of Zaïre, Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania. Many matrilineal peoples live in regions of poor soil, where villages are small and frequently divide when they move. Many inhabit regions where cattle cannot live. But some matrilineal peoples keep cattle, and one, the most populous of all, the Ashanti in Ghana who number over half a million, own valuable land on which they grow cocoa for sale.

The different descent rules lead to a number of other differences between societies of these two types. In particular, patrilineal peoples marry with bridewealth – a substantial payment to a woman's kin which has the effect of making her children the husband's legitimate offspring. In a matrilineal society the children belong to their mother's descent group, and if any marriage payment is made it is usually much smaller. Such societies have to face difficult problems when they enter the market economy; a family may work together to earn a money income, but anything that the father may have saved will go outside the family when he dies. The patrilineal people to be discussed here are the Tallensi, the first African society of which a detailed account of kinship has been given; as examples of matriliny I have chosen the Tonga and Lele.

Some peoples reckon descent through males for some purposes and through females for others. The characteristic distinction is that land is transmitted through males (and therefore patrilineal descent groups tend to live together) and

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movable property through females (and therefore matrilineal groups make and receive the marriage payments of their members). The first people of this kind to be closely studied were the Yakö on the Cross River in the east of Nigeria, described by Daryll Forde. Others have been found more recently in northern Ghana. The Herero in South-West Africa also have a double descent system, but not much is known about their institutions.

The other possible way of reckoning kinship is to give equal weight to both parents and to one's collateral kin on both sides. This is not common in Africa, but two examples may be quoted. First are the Lozi, the dominant people of the Barotse kingdom in Zambia, and their system illustrates how grouping by descent may lose its importance when a central authority is responsible both for justice and for the allocation of land. Lozi live on little mounds rising above the flood waters of the Zambezi River, each under the authority of a headman who holds his position from the Paramount Chief. A man seeking new land would go to a mound village where he had kin – any kin – and ask the headman to admit him. So the population of such a village would be a body of kin, but not a group based on a fixed principle of descent. A headman's successor would be chosen by the people living on the mound at the time, but not in any fixed line of succession. This type of kinship system is called *cognatic*.

The example to be discussed here is provided by a people very different from the Lozi. They are the Ndendeuli of south-western Tanzania, an amalgam of tribes who were conquered in the nineteenth century by Ngoni invaders from the south, but managed to move out of reach of control by their Ngoni masters as the latters' power became weaker. But Gulliver, who has described their system, does not think their lack of lineal descent rules is the result of mixture or of their subject status; he thinks they never were organised in descent groups. His treatment of their kinship organisation introduces a number of concepts which had not previously been used in analysing African societies.

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POLITICAL SYSTEMS

It was in reference to African ethnography that anthropologists first began to ask the question whether every society must have a political system. If there was no chief with a right to command obedience, where should one look for such a system? What, in fact, should it be? The first answer was given in the introduction which Radcliffe-Brown wrote for *African Political Systems*, and was illustrated by the brief account of the Nuer which Evans-Pritchard later amplified in his book *The Nuer*. The definition (abbreviated a little) said the political system of any society was *that part of the total system* which is concerned with the maintenance of order by the use or the possibility of use of physical force, a definition that people have often misquoted when seeking to invalidate it. The Nuer are the classic type of a *segmentary* system, in which descent groups are autonomous, and their 'ordered anarchy' is maintained by the readiness of individuals to fight for their rights and the obligation on kinsmen to support one another. Evans-Pritchard's account of them has indeed sometimes been described as 'classical structural analysis', with the implication that any structural analysis must produce such a model and therefore the method is inadequate for a study of political behaviour. Reinterpretations of it have been offered. But it remains a landmark in the development of social anthropology.

The type of system known as *age organisation* has been mentioned as characteristic of nomad pastoralists. This distributes political functions among the whole population. The entry of boys into manhood is recognised by a formal and often elaborate ritual of initiation, and further rituals mark the stages through which they move as they grow older. Before fighting was forbidden by the overriding authority of colonial powers, the young men were warriors and were expected to spend a large part of their time in raiding neighbouring tribes. Now they exercise coercion to implement the decisions of the elders. The fullest account of such a system, and one which examines it primarily from the point of view of social control and the maintenance of order, is Gulliver's study of the Arusha, a settled agricultural people who may

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have broken off from a Masai tribe. Gulliver shows how the meeting of the elders is one of a number of alternative venues for the discussion of disputes, and how individuals choose where they will take their quarrels according to their chances of winning support. The Arusha system is much more complex than that of the Karimojong, who were mentioned in connection with the way of life of pastoral peoples.

When we come to discuss kingdoms, we may seem to be on more familiar ground. But in fact there are many differences in the organisation of kingdoms, and some are very unlike those we read of in the history of Europe. There is much argument on the question whether any of them should be called feudal, and words such as 'vassal', which are associated with the feudal period of European history, are sometimes used in describing them. The examples to be discussed are the cluster of Interlacustrine Bantu states, Bunyoro and Buganda, Rwanda and Burundi and the kingdom of Benin in western Nigeria. Every centralised political system contains its own checks and balances, if only those that arise from the competition of rivals for office, or from the need to distribute power by delegating authority. All competitors for power need followers, and although they may get followers by coercion, they must make themselves popular to some degree. This is a crude form of check on abuse, and it becomes less effective with the development of specialised armies and weapons. The Interlacustrine Bantu states had not gone very far along this line of development. They rested on a system of clientage, in which a rich and powerful man would guarantee protection to weaker individuals who offered him their services. As far as we can tell from the records the fortunes of individuals and states fluctuated with their power to keep the loyalty of individual clients and vassal rulers. One effectively centralised state was Rwanda, where the ruler did maintain a standing army, recruited from the pastoral aristocracy and 'serviced' by the commoners who herded the cattle that went with the army to supply its food. Writers have sharply contrasted these kingdoms with the egalitarian segmentary societies that are their neighbours, saying that they take for granted 'the premise of inequality'; they assume that some men are born to rule and others to serve.

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The West African example, Benin, is a much more complex one and has a longer recorded history. It belongs to the part of Africa that has been engaged for centuries in a coastal trade with Europeans (not only for slaves) which rival rulers have competed to control. Slave raiding was in fact traditional in West Africa, and his control of a large number of slaves was one source of a ruler's power.

But what is remarkable about West African polities is the complexity of the offices and roles that were recognised. There were councils with a great measure of autonomy whom the ruler was required to consult. There were associations of palace officials, and of others outside the palace, within which individuals strove for promotion. There were bodies of priests on whose performance of ritual the rulers depended for legitimacy and for the prosperity of their domains. These are the kingdoms from which we have hard data on politics as the struggle for power.

RELIGION

African religion has been the subject in recent years of much theoretical discussion. In this field social anthropology has been dominated during its history by a number of different theories. Frazer's were concerned with religion as a means of getting what you want (which it certainly has been to many believers). He saw it as the attitude of people who were disappointed to find that they could not control the forces of nature by applying the 'bastard science' of magic; they must have reasoned, he said, that there were beings stronger than themselves whose will was thwarting their will and must be placated. The individuals who hit on this explanation also claimed to know how to approach these unseen beings; they became priests and dominated their fellows to their own advantage.

Durkheim was writing at the same time as Frazer, but he was concerned not so much with belief systems as with the relation between religious belief and social order. For him the essence of religion was the church, in which believers gathered to assert their faith, and he held, though he did not put it in exactly these words, that the beings towards whom they directed their worship were in fact personifications of the social order conceived as a moral order. This theory led schol-

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