

THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE:
CRISIS OF A CONCEPT OR CRISIS
OF THE EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS
OF ANTHROPOLOGY?

I. TWO THINGS DESIGNATED BY A SINGLE TERM

Anthropologists customarily use the term 'tribe' to designate two realms of different yet connected facts. On the one hand, nearly all of them make use of it to distinguish one *type of society* among many, one specific mode of social organization which they compare to others—'bands,' 'States,' etc. There is, however, a lack of unanimity on this point, an outcome of the imprecision, the haziness of the criteria selected to define and to isolate these various types of society. But the discord is deeper yet with respect to the second use of the term 'tribe,' when it is used to designate a *stage in the evolution* of human society.

Moreover the link between these two uses of the term 'tribe,'

Translated by R. Blohm

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understood as a type of society and as an evolutionary stage, is very clear cut since from the perspective of the evolutionists each stage in society's evolution is characterized by a specific type of social organization. Yet the majority of anthropologists refuse to infer from the existence of a mode of social organization the existence of a necessary stage in the evolution of humanity, and dispute even the theoretical possibility of a scientific analysis of the evolution of human societies (Leach), or deny being in any way concerned with their history. This is the case with most anthropologists, with the notable exception of Evans-Pritchard or Raymond Firth, who resort to functionalism or to a certain structuralism. The matter is further complicated by the fact that even among those who defend the program of constructing a scientific theory of social evolution certain individuals, like Herbert Lewis, do not see in the tribal mode of social organization a *necessary and general* stage in this evolution while others, like Morton Fried, go yet further and see in it at once a secondary effect of the appearance of state-societies and a veritable dead end in the evolution of humanity.

UNEASINESS, DISPUTE, CRISIS OF A CONCEPT

In short, although the term 'tribe' has literally invaded the writings and the language of anthropologists and does not appear to be situated on the battleground of the bitterest of theoretical disputes, for a decade doubt, uneasiness, criticism and at times outright rejection have little by little made their appearance in connection with it and we stand today on the threshold of an out-and-out crisis. Julian Steward, himself an evolutionist, calls for the greatest prudence before what he calls an 'all-encompassing' concept, and others, like Swartz, Turner and Toden choose systematically to ignore it and to remain silent about its existence although they explore the realm of political anthropology at the heart of which the concept of tribe has traditionally played the role of key concept. However that is only half of the difficulty, for to the criticisms of the theoretical kind are added a discontent over and violent attacks against the ideological use made of the concept under the derivative and related concept of 'tribalism.' The existence of tribal organizations in Africa, America, Oceania

and Asia seems in fact to be responsible for the difficulties encountered by emerging nations in their economic and political development and in the securing of their independence. The existence of vestiges of more or less deep-rooted pre-colonial organizations seems to have provided the reasons for such events as the war in Biafra, the Mau Mau uprising, the dissidence of the Tuaregs or the 'animistic' tribes in the southern Sudan, the decadence of the Indians in South America, etc.

At stake here, as Jomo Kenyatta has shown in his celebrated work *Facing Mount Kenya*, is not merely the interpretation of the world, but action upon its contradictions and its transformation from the starting point of an exact analysis. Numerous are the anthropologists and politicians who reject as theoretically false and as politically detrimental the use of the concepts of 'tribe' and 'tribalism' to define the present-day contradictions in 'under-developed' countries. They, to the contrary, see in the contradictions attributed to tribalism less the damage inflicted by pre-colonial structures or the tribal organizations which were believed to have been destroyed but which would again come violently to the surface, than the legacy of the colonial period and the new relations of neo-colonial domination. Elliott Skinner, anthropologist and United States ambassador to Upper Volta in 1967, wrote

"It is unfortunate that the term 'tribalism' with all its connotations of primitivism and traditionalism should be the name given to the identity taken on in contemporary Africa by groups which are in competition with one another for power and prestige. Some of the names used today as symbols of the identity of certain of these groups refer to diverse socio-cultural entities of the past. Yet many of these so-called 'tribal' groups were creations of the colonial period and even those among them who could lay claim to a continuity with the past have lost so many of their traditional characteristics that they could in fact be considered new entities."

The concept of tribe is thus 'in a crisis' and there is a two-fold urgency, both theoretical and practical, to go back to the causes of the misfortune which has befallen it and to define it in order to examine it critically and to assess its true scope. The

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best method of doing this seems to be to retrace briefly the history of the concept, from Morgan, the founder of modern-day anthropology, to Marshall Sahlins in particular, the author who has recently made the most sustained and most brilliant effort mounted to date to define the concept rigorously and to reinterpret new ethnographic material which has accumulated over the past century. At the end of the journey we shall, perhaps, discover that the trouble does not attach simply to a concept and that the crisis is that of the foundations and empirical methods of anthropology and the social sciences.

II. A BRIEF GLANCE BACK AT THE INDO-EUROPEAN ORIGINS OF THE TERM

The English 'tribe' and the French 'tribu' are derived from the Latin *tribus* and the Umbrian *trifú*, or from their Greek equivalent *phule* (φυλή), terms which belong to the vocabulary of the most ancient of Indo-European institutions. In giving an account of them we must go back to the superb etymological and semantic analyses of this vocabulary by Émile Benveniste. In the beginning, then, these concepts were empirical concepts and they were necessarily given an empirical content varying with the course of the history of these peoples, but, in their most ancient context, they described a specific form of social and political organization which existed in all of these societies. The Indo-European tribe was the most widespread form of social and political organization before the appearance of the city-state. It collected together elementary social units of a smaller magnitude—the *génos* (γένος) and the *phratra* (φράτρα) of the Greeks, and the *gens* and the *curia* of the Latins. The essential point here is that all of these terms (with the exception of *curia*) belong at the same time to the vocabulary of kinship and to the political vocabulary. This implies an internal relationship, real or imagined, between kinship and political organization. Indeed, as Benveniste has pointed out, "the principal Indo-European languages agree in laying down common 'extraction' as the foundation of a social group" (vol. I, p. 258). In this sense, what caused the concept of tribe to be introduced spontaneously into the thought and language of Indo-Europeans was something given in their experience, an observational fact.

What has remained more or less hidden for centuries after the disappearance of the ancient Indo-European institutions is the internal relationship between kinship and politics and thus the key to understanding the exact nature of the social groups designated by the terms 'clan,' 'phratry' and 'tribe.' As Morgan noted, by the middle of the nineteenth century, when anthropology had become a scientific discipline, these terms had for a long time already been used indifferently in place of one another by well-informed missionaries, administrators, geographers and explorers. This was the situation at the outset of Morgan's scientific analysis of the forms of social organization of the Iroquois, which were followed little by little by those of numerous other Indian peoples of North and South America.

THE POINT OF DEPARTURE: MORGAN (1877)

In order to understand Morgan's theses concerning 'tribal' forms of social organization, we must briefly recall the great discovery contained in his work entitled *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (Washington, 1871). There Morgan showed that the social relationships which governed the organization of most primitive societies were those of kinship. He then showed that these kinship relationships had an internal *logic* which could be found in the meticulous study of marriage rules and kinship terminology which, for the most part, appeared stripped of any logic in the eyes of Europeans baffled by the 'classificatory' systems of kinship found in Asia, Africa, Oceania and America. He supposed, furthermore, that these kinship systems had a *history* and succeeded one another in necessary order from the time when man emerged from the sexually promiscuous animal state of primitive hordes and little by little incest and marriage between ever expanding categories of consanguineous relatives were prohibited. The 'Human Family' evolved from the polygamy of the primitive form of 'group marriage,' which has today completely disappeared, to the monogamy of European nuclear families. Morgan supposed, finally, that systems of matrilineal kinship preceded patrilineal systems in the evolutionary process.

From this summary we can understand Morgan's definition

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of the tribal organization. A tribe is a "completely organized society" (p. 122) and thus a form of social organization capable of *reproducing itself*. "It illustrates the condition of humanity in the *barbaric state*," or of humanity which has emerged from the primitive savagery but has not yet reached the stage of civilization, of 'political' society, or of the State. However if the tribe is "a completely organized society" we cannot understand its functioning without first understanding the "structure and functions" of the elementary groups which compose it, namely, the clans. A clan is "a group of consanguineous relatives who are descendants from a common ancestor and are distinguished by the name of their *gens* and tied to one another in blood relationships." After having discovered "the identity in structure and function" of the American Indian clan with the *genos* or the *gens* of the ancient Greeks and Romans, Morgan used the term *gens* in preference to the term clan, and spoke of "gentilic society" rather than "tribal society." A tribe is an assemblage of clans. "Each tribe is individualized by a name, by a separate dialect, by a sovereign government and by the possession of territory which it occupies and defends as its own." By "sovereign government" Morgan meant a council of sachems and chiefs elected by the *gentes* and, in certain cases, a 'sovereign chief' of the tribe. We should also mention two other "functions and attributes" of the tribal organization: it is characterized by "adherence to one religious faith and participation in a common cult" and—as has been strongly emphasized in the polemics against the theses of McLennan in *Primitive Marriage*—the tribe is an endogamous group while the clan is exogamous (pp. 518-524). Clans and tribes were constantly multiplied and differentiated from one another following migrations resulting from population growth and the limitation of means of subsistence. "With time the migrants became different in terms of their interests, strangers in terms of their feelings and, lastly, divergent in terms of their language. Separation and independence ensued although their territories adjoined one another. A new tribe was thus created ... (by) a process (which) should be regarded as a natural and irreducible result arising from both the gentilic structure and the needs attaching to the social conditions in which people found themselves." (p. 106).

The differentiation of ways of life and of linguistic stock was thus due to that "constant tendency toward disintegration ... followed by complete segmentation" (p. 107) which characterizes the tribal organization. This multiplication of tribes was accompanied by a state of permanent war between themselves since each tribe was considered to be at war with all of those with which it had not formally signed a treaty of peace which was otherwise provisional. Segmentation and incessant war were "a strong obstacle to the progress of savage and barbarous tribes."

There were, nevertheless, certain tribal societies which brought humanity to the stage of civilization, but at the price of the dissolution and the disappearance of their clannish and tribal structure. For Morgan civilization appeared with the State, and the State had as its foundation the control of territory and of people who inhabited this territory but who were organized no longer in kinship groups but in territorial groups, in towns for example. The reforms of Solon and Cleisthenes in ancient Greece demonstrated the radical impossibility "of basing a political society or a State on the *gentes*" (p. 123) and the necessity of transforming these ancient kinship groups into territorial ones.

Morgan saw the reasons for this evolution toward the State and this decomposition of tribal society in the appearance and development of private property, consisting firstly of herds, then of land and, finally, of slaves, and thus of an unequal accumulation of private wealth which consolidated the power and bond of the monogamous family. Morgan sought the ultimate explanation of the appearance of this particular stage, as in the case of all others in the evolution of humanity, firstly in "the development of the art of subsistence... perhaps the most satisfactory basis for these divisions." This is the materialist thesis which Marx and Engels adopted, but Morgan supposed at the same time that the development of the art of subsistence accompanied the *parallel* development of ideas contained as germs in the mind before all experience—the idea of government, that of the family and that of property. What Morgan attempted, using this composite foundation consisting of materialist and idealist principles as the starting point, was to place in parallel in hypothetical and largely speculative fashion the series of technological innovations and the succession of social institutions. He never really could show the *internal and necessary relations*

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between the social structures, or reconstruct the mechanism of the mutual causality of these structures and particularly of the causality of the economy.

“Research has not been conducted sufficiently deeply in this direction in order for it to produce the required information.” (p. 9).

Where are we today? What has withstood, collapsed under the force of or developed out of these analyses by Morgan of the concept of tribe?

ONE CENTURY LATER: FUNCTIONALISTS AND NEO-EVOLUTIONISTS

If today we consult, for example, the article entitled “Tribe” written by John J. Honigmann for the *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, published in 1964 under the auspices of UNESCO, we would ascertain that Morgan’s definition has held up in its descriptive part in which a *type* of society is depicted, but that the concept of tribe has been completely severed from all reference to an evolutionary stage to which this type of society would correspond:

“In general, anthropologists agree on the criteria by which a tribe may be described: common territory, a tradition of common descent, common language, common culture, and a common name—all these forming the basis of the joining of smaller groups such as villages, bands, districts, or lineages.”

A Dictionary of the Social Sciences, p. 729

This cut is partially explained by the collapse, at the beginning of this century, of the evolutionist theories of the last century and by the very principles of the functionalist current which afterward swept anthropology. For the functionalists, with the exception however of Evans-Pritchard and a few other brilliant researchers, a social system is a whole whose parts are necessarily interconnected, but about this necessity the history itself of this system cannot, according to them, teach us anything because history is of the order of the event and of

the accidental occurrence and not of the necessary. There exist many laws of the functioning of societies but there exist no laws of their evolution or of their necessary transformation.

However the concept of tribe, even severed from or rid of its evolutionist content, presents other fissures which extend into cracks in the preserved part. Some are of minor importance. It has been shown that linguistic, cultural and 'tribal' unity do not coincide in a number of cases. (See the articles of M. Fried and G. Dole and the works of the linguists Dell Hymes, John Gumperz, Paul Friedrich and C. Voegelin, or of statisticians like Driver and Naroll. These investigators owed their motivation to the works of Boas, Morgan's critic). It has been shown that the names of 'tribes' were often terms applied to a group by outside groups who wanted simply to say "those people" (Leach, Fried), and that the common descent of the members of a tribe from founding ancestors was a fiction (Malinowski, Leach). Finally it has been shown that the existence of a group consciousness or an ideology of common membership very often did not warrant the conclusion that an ethnic community was a tribe, whereas for Linton this was the "test" of tribal unity. (Cf. Moerman with respect to the Lu of Thailand together with the reply by Naroll and the article by Bessac on the Monguor and the Yogur). More profoundly concerning groups united by matrilineal descent than concerning those united by patrilineal descent, it has furthermore been shown that the structure of bands of hunter-collectors was a very complex state of affairs, that there existed genuine aristocracies and hereditary chiefships among primitive tribes, although Morgan disputed the theoretical possibility of this (p. 259), that the Incas and the Aztecs were neither "military democracies" nor simple chiefdoms but genuine state-societies where the dominant class was confused with the State and where the tribal structure had not disappeared, etc. It is perhaps here, around the problem of the nature of the political relationships which characterize the mode of tribal organization, that center the principal difficulties of the concept of tribe. Honigmann moreover emphasizes this with the greatest clarity:

"While there is general agreement on the already established characteristics of a tribe (cf. definition above), difficulties

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arise as soon as the political characteristics of the tribe are discussed."

Honigmann then cites a classification, widespread among anthropologists, according to which three types of tribe are distinguished by reference to their political structures: acephalous non-segmental tribes, acephalous segmental tribes and centralized tribes. He is thus led to define as "tribes" bands of Eskimo hunter-fishermen, the Ibo farmers of Africa (a simple non-segmental tribe), the Nuer shepherds of the Sudan or the matrilineal fishermen-planters of the Dobu Islands in the Pacific (acephalous segmental tribes) as well as the ancient Polynesian chiefdoms of Hawaii and Tonga, the Mongol khanates and the Mossi kingdoms (centralized tribes).

There springs up the major difficulty of the concept of tribe. This difficulty is eloquently expressed in the reserve of Honigmann when he refrains from adding political criteria to the other "already established" criteria which define the concept: no matter what the primitive society, it—or at least that at the heart of which there do not exist forms which are clearly characterized by class relationships or governmental power—can be characterized as a tribal society. Even this restriction is not altogether exact since numerous African or Asiatic kingdoms are genuine state-societies. One may legitimately question himself on the interest of such an all-encompassing concept, a nocturnal one in the sense in which Hegel, in *The Philosophy of Right*, speaks of "the night when all cats are black." Now it is this concept, inherited from Morgan, on the one hand cut off from its content by the functionalists, and, on the other, submitted to incessant critical harassment, that Marshall Sahlins, Service and other neo-evolutionists have tried rigorously to redefine and to reuse in all of its initial uses in order to characterize at once a type of society, within the framework of a comparative anthropology, and a stage in social evolution, within the framework of a theory of history.

Sahlins, in 1961, and Service, in 1962, presented an outline of the social evolution of humanity, depicting it in four stages: the stage of bands, that of tribes, that of chiefdoms and, finally, that of state-societies with which civilization made its entry into history. "A band is only a residential association of nuclear

families.” (Sahlins 1961, p. 324; Service 1962, p. 111). A tribe is “of the order of a large collection of bands, but is not simply a collection of bands” (Sahlins 1960, p. 326). A chiefdom “is distinguished from the tribal type by the presence of centers coordinating economic, social and religious activity” (p. 143) and “redistributing a large part of the production of local communities.” There then appears the State which raises the level of centralization and constitutes a political structure which is external to local social groups and decidedly superior to them, transforming the advantages owing to inequalities of social rank into class privileges.

We have here, for the most part, Morgan’s outline, rearranged in order that new ethnological factors be taken into account. We shall bring to light only two of the rearrangements. Firstly, the concept of ‘band’ has taken the place of the concept of ‘primitive horde’ in the description of the “dominant type of paleolithic society” (Sahlins, p. 324). Secondly, the existence of ‘chiefdoms,’ societies which had no sure theoretical status in the work of Morgan, is henceforth recognized.

What are the hypotheses underlying such a schema? One is that the evolution of societies has proceeded, in principle, like that of living organisms, from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, from the simple to the complex, and that each of the distinguishable stages thus corresponds to a more complex level of structural differentiation and integration (Sahlins 1961, p. 354). Sahlins searches for the causes of this evolution in the transformations of the economy, in the “neolithic revolution” which, as the hypothesis goes, permitted not really the birth but the generalization of tribal societies and their domination over hunter-collector societies of the paleolithic age. Once these hypotheses are accepted the method of Sahlins and Service consists in constructing a “likely” representation of this process by selecting the functional “traits” of some actual societies which seem to correspond to each of these levels and in placing these materials into the different compartments of the schema. It should be noted that the very fact of placing these few actual societies into particular compartments automatically *transforms* them into ‘symbolic’ representations of the structure of human society at particular stages in its development and that there thus *automatically disappears* the *actual* evolution peculiar to

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each of these societies as well as their history and History itself. At the same time, since these societies serve to illustrate a stage which they themselves have not passed through historically, they acquire an imaginary future at the very moment when their real past disappears.

In 1968 Marshall Sahlins, in his work *Tribesman*, modified in a significant way this outline which he reduced to the succession of three stages—band, tribe and State (instead of four), without giving any theoretical justification for this change and without there being any doctrinal modification of the principles and causes of the social evolution preceding or accompanying this change. The grounds for the exclusion, in 1961, of ‘chiefdoms’ from the tribal stage—namely the presence of “hereditary functions” and a “permanent political structure” in the hands of certain sectors of society—no longer seemed to be grounds for their exclusion in 1968. Tribal societies and societies with chiefships are here presented as “two developments” of a *single type* of “segmental” society, like two permutations of a single general model, the first of which leads to an extreme decentralization of segmental social relationships, and the second of which to their integration into levels of social organization higher than those of local segments. The first permutation gives rise to “segmental tribes properly so called” (1968, p. 20), and the second—to “chiefdoms” at the heart of which “tribal culture anticipates the State and its complexities” (*ibid.*, p. 20). Between these two opposed types there range a multitude of intermediate combinations of such a kind that Sahlins groups them, the totality of remaining known primitive societies, under the concept of “tribal society.” He sees in this extreme diversity the product of multiple structural variations forced by the adaptation of the “neolithic” economy to extremely diverse ecological recesses in the course of a world-wide expansion movement begun around 9000 B.C., in the Near East, and around 5,000 B.C., in the New World, with the first forms of domestication of plants and animals, and followed by the progressive disappearance of the paleolithic hunter-collectors, little by little driven to marginal ecological zones not adaptable to neolithic agricultural and breeding techniques. Under the headings of neolithic economy and tribal society are found side by side the societies of densed-field farmers of the Amazon

region, Oceania and Equatorial Africa, the nomadic shepherds of the arid belt of Asia and Africa, the hunter-fishermen of the north-west coast of North America who had already, as a result of the lavishness of their environment in food resources, reached the stage of tribe before even the appearance of neolithic agriculture, the mounted hunters of America who had rapidly transformed their societies when they had domesticated the horse introduced by the whites, and societies engaged in an intensive agriculture often with irrigation, like those of the Pueblos, the Polynesians of Hawaii, etc.

This inventory of innumerable societies and economic systems is of objects so scattered that, in order to justify it, it would be necessary to demonstrate rigorously that we have before us so many mutations of a single fundamental type of "neolithic" economic relationship. Sahlins completes this first hypothesis with another by supposing that this economic and ecological diversity explains the diversity of social relationships which are found in "tribal" societies, and particularly the diversity of kinship relationships, be they of the lineal or the cognatic type, etc.

It would be absurd to reproach him for not having solved "the most profound mysteries of cultural anthropology" (p. 48) and for not having offered a complete theory of the social evolution of humanity. The point is an epistemological one and rests on the fact that Sahlins, like Lewis Morgan before him, *resorts to a method which does not allow the verification of its own hypotheses* and which consists above all in comparing multiple primitive stateless and classless societies and seeking to *isolate* their common characteristics while provisionally laying aside their differences. This is an empirical step which leads to the opposite result of that sought, for, in order to demonstrate that the different economic systems and the different types of social relationships which he has inventoried are necessary and regulated transformations of social structures (which must be reconstructed by thought since they are not directly observable as such), Sahlins would have to use a method which gives an account, *by the operation of the same principles*, of both the similarities *and* the differences between these economic and social systems, and thus a method which does not set aside the difference and does not find them to be an embarrassing residue.

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Now it is such a pendular swing between similarities and differences that we witness in Sahlins' work.

The first characteristic common to all tribal societies, which he isolates, is seen in the fact that the elementary social units which compose them are "multifamilial groups who collectively exploit a common bed of natural resources and form a residential unit for the whole year or most of the year." He calls these elementary units "primary segments" from whose meaning is derived that of "segmental societies" which is used indifferently in place of "tribal societies." Sahlins wilfully ignores the internal characteristics of these social segments, that is, the exact nature of the kinship relationship which structure these multifamilial groups and determine whether these segments are of patrilineal (Tiv) or matrilineal (Iroquois) descent, are cognatic segments (the Iban of Bosneo, the Lapps), etc. What is isolated in this procedure is thus a characteristic belonging more to the "general form" of a great number of primitive societies than to their specific content.

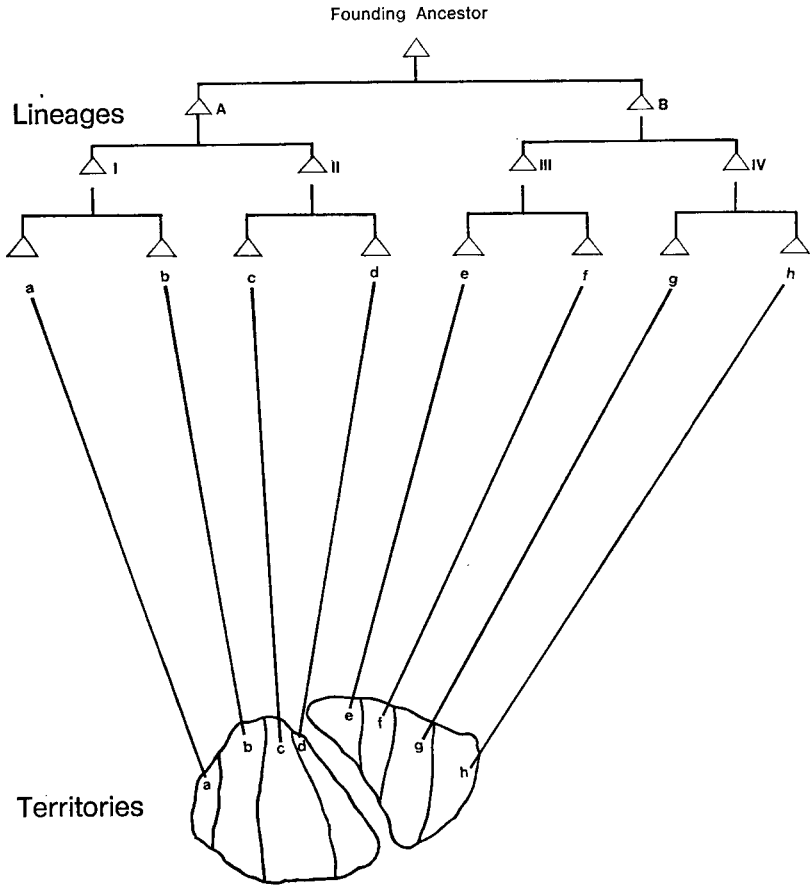
The second common element which he throws into relief is the multifunctional character of the kinship relationships which structure these primary segments. By so doing he seeks to bring out the fact that these kinship relationships, their patrilineal, matrilineal, bilineal or non-lineal character set aside, function *at the same time* as relationships which are economic, political, ideological, etc., and have the quality of being, according to the famous expression of Evans-Pritchard, "functionally generalized." The recognition of the polyfunctional character of kinship relationships has great critical import on the theoretical plane, for it prevents kinship from being viewed only as an element of the social superstructure distinct and separate from the economic infrastructure, the mode of production. From this Sahlins concludes that the various economic systems of "tribal" societies are so many varieties of a single fundamental mode of production, the "familial mode of production." This expression is not synonymous with "mode of familial production" for production at the heart of tribal societies often implies cooperation of several families or putting to use, aside from familial productive forces, the cooperation of non-familial social groups (age classes etc.). It signifies only that production and consumption are *in the final analysis* regulated, stimulated

and limited by the needs and the means of familial groups (pp. 74-5).

Until now the expression "tribal societies" has designated all primitive societies which have in common two visible characteristics of their functioning: the presence of elementary social units, of primary segments which have the form of multifamilial local groups, and the 'plurifunctionality' of the kinship relationships which structure these familial groups. However once one steps beyond this common denominator the differences between tribal societies come to the fore, and they must be inventoried and explained. Now, if there are some which simply lead one to distinguish sub-classes within the class of tribal societies, there are others which bring into question the very unity of this class and it is here that all the theoretical difficulties peculiar to a comparative empirical approach arise and are concentrated. To give proof of this it suffices to analyze the contradictions which Sahlins becomes involved in, and the troubles he gets into when he tries to include in the definition of tribal societies a third element: the property of "structural equivalence" of the primary segments which make them up. Now here we come upon some fundamental problems of anthropology.

By "structural equivalence" of primary segments is designated the fact that they are functionally equivalent, that is to say, economically, politically, culturally and ideologically identical and equal. Each segment, each local community is whatever the others are and does for itself whatever the others do. The best illustration of this principle of the structural equivalence of segments is, for Sahlins, Tiv society in Nigeria. All of the local Tiv communities are lineal segments which claim descent from a common ancestor and occupy adjoining territories. The levels of social organization higher than that of these local communities exist only temporarily, before a conflict puts them in opposition. If community *a* attacks community *b*, then lineage I completely affirms its solidarity and is mobilized to confront lineage II. If lineal segment *d* attacks the local neighbouring community *e*, all of the descendants of ancestor A are mobilized against maximal lineage B. The levels of kinship and social organization higher than the local segmental level thus exist and become

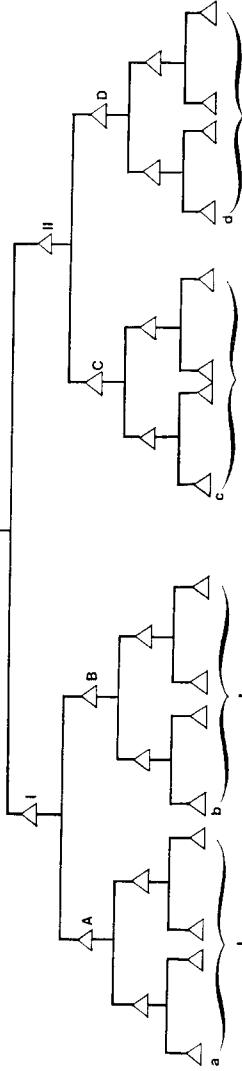
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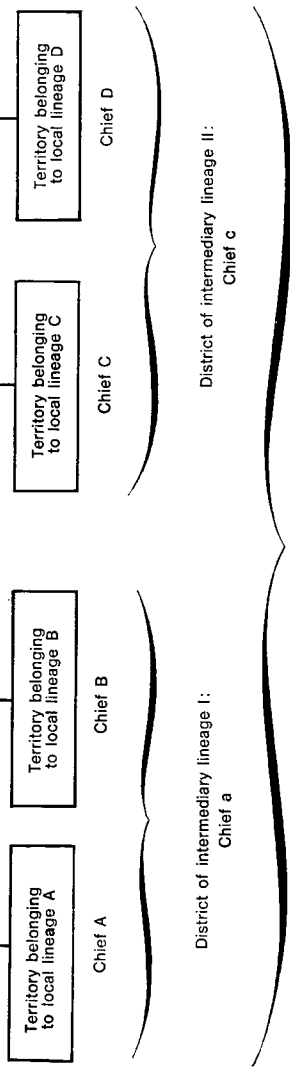
From Paul Bohannan, *The Migration and Expansion of the Tiv, Africa II 1954, 3.*

Founding Ancestor

Lineages



Territories



From Marshall Sahlins, Tribesmen p. 25 (slightly modified by M. G.)

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complementary only "in opposition," according to the formula of Evans-Pritchard with respect to the Nuer (1940, p. 144).

Let us compare this diagram with the scaled-down model of a Polynesian chiefdom, "integrated" in the form of a vast "conical clan" (Kirchhoff), annotated by Sahlins.

We immediately discover that, in the case of the Polynesian chiefdom, the principle of structural equivalence of primary segments which is at work among the Tiv and the Nuer and which, according to Sahlins, characterizes all tribal societies is no longer operative. All of the segments and individuals which compose the chiefdom are here arranged in a hierarchical order descending from chief (a), the eldest of the descendants of the eldest son of the clan's founder. (Among the Kachin of Burma, on the other hand, authority comes from the youngest son of the descendants of the youngest son of the founding ancestor. Cf. Leach.) We have before us a segmental society certainly, but also one which is made into a hierarchy of unequal social ranks which become higher the closer one comes, following genealogical lines, to the youngest of the youngest branch of descent from the founder. Sahlins stresses that such a chiefdom is not a society of classes. "It is a structure more of degrees of interest than of conflicts of interest, and of familial priorities reflected in the control of wealth and might, in the right to exact the service of others, in the access to divine power and in the material aspects of life styles in such a way that, if all individuals are akin to one another and members of the society, certain of them are members *to a greater degree* than others" (p. 24). Here, for the same reasons why the primary segments of society are no longer functionally equivalent, the levels of lineal organization *higher* than that of the local segments—which have but an episodic existence and a very limited social importance in the reproduction of acephalous societies—exist in the form of *permanent institutions*, assigned *different* and complementary *functions* for the reproduction of the entire society, and thus controlling in varying but effective ways the *internal* functioning and reproduction of local communities. The latter no longer have the great political, economic and ideological autonomy which they had at the heart of "acephalous tribes." It is this hierarchy of functions which makes the highest chief and the kinship group from which he has come the center and

summit of the whole of society since he personifies and controls, in their entirety, the reciprocal dependence relationships between all of the groups and individuals which compose the society.

Thus even if there is a *formal* resemblance between the lineal organization of certain acephalous tribes and that of certain chiefdoms (although even in the opinion of Marshall Sahlins the Polynesian clan is more of a cognatic descent group and is thus, really, non-lineal despite the fact that it is one of patrilineal "ideology"), the main point is that these lineages *function* in a completely different way. Indeed the kinship relationships are segmental and multifunctional in both cases, but these resemblances in 'form' appear to be of limited importance over against the consequences to all of the economic, political and ideological aspects of the functioning and reproduction of these societies following from the differences in their internal functions and structures.

This summary demonstrates clearly that, though the general form of social relationships is here still that of multifunctional kinship relationships, acephalous segmental societies and the great Polynesian chiefdoms in fact present us with two different modes of production *whose difference is not that of two varieties of one and the same species*—the so-called "familial mode of production" of Sahlins. For what above all characterize and determine the relations of production in the case of the Polynesian chiefdoms are the relationships existing between an aristocracy which *does not labour* and which possesses political, ideological and religious power and draws upon the labour, the production and the material resources of the direct producers, the mass of common people who live in local communities. Indeed this is an important fact which should be explained, namely, that the aristocracy and the common people are, or consider themselves to be, distant kin and treat one another as such. It is equally significant, but of less import, that the form of their kinship relationships is patrilineal, but what is decisive is the fact that the mode of production and the political and ideological structures which are tied to it are of a kind completely different from that found among lineal societies such as those of the Nuer and the Tiv. The appearance of genuine social classes implies the disappearance not of kinship relationships but of their capacity to be the general form of social relationships, but

quite specific conditions are required in order that political and ideological relationships and those of production existing between the aristocracy and the common people develop independently of those of kinship. Sahlins has indeed not ignored this fundamental problem of the appearance of classes, but he has brought it up without dealing with it.

III. ATTEMPT AT A BALANCE-SHEET: CRISIS OF A CONCEPT OR CRISIS OF THE EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Thus, in the wake of the most sustained effort mounted in anthropology in a long time to redefine and to put to effective use the concept of 'tribe,' one is engulfed by a result which is largely negative. The class of tribal societies finds itself split into two, and on each side of the dividing line, whose nature and origin are obscure, are gathered, on the one hand, acephalous segmental societies and, on the other, societies of chiefdoms. The structural differences between these societies outweigh the similarities both in number and in importance and in light of this the attempt of Sahlins in 1968 to gather within a single category these two classes of societies which in 1961 he distinguished and opposed comes to nought. This set-back moreover confirms the results of the statistical comparisons of Cohen and Schlegel who, using Fisher's mathematical procedures of regressive analysis of the covariance of multiple variables, concluded in 1967 that "there was no *solid* support for the idea of the existence of a unified social stage for bands of hunter-collectors and state-societies." It is probable that a meticulous structural analysis of the economic systems of these societies would reveal the existence of many more modes of production at the heart of these two categories of societies and would overturn this too summary a classification.

Split down the middle, the class of 'tribal' societies is furthermore hardly distinct at its extremities from two other categories of societies which are opposed to each other, namely, 'bands' of hunter-collectors and 'state'-societies. Herbert Lewis and Morton Fried have rightly shown that the criteria retained by Sahlins and Service to define acephalous segmental tribal societies *do not really differentiate them* from those societies referred to

as 'bands' to which the latter oppose them. Moreover, very far from being fundamentally and strictly incompatible with the existence of tribal societies, a State-Empire very often consolidates the chiefdoms and the tribes which it dominates and sometimes creates them in their entirety without there being any necessity to conclude from these processes, an example of which is provided by the practice of the European colonial powers of yesteryear, that tribes and chiefdoms were always and exclusively *secondary* social formations, by-products of the formation of state-societies, as do Fried and Cohen.

In short it seems that the concept of 'tribal society' designates a small class of visible traits of the functioning of numerous 'primitive' societies, namely, the 'segmental' character of the elementary socio-economic units which compose them, the real or apparent character of the 'kinship groups' of these socio-economic units and the 'multifunctional' character of these kinship relationships. The vagueness of these criteria is such that this concept may be applied to an incalculable number of primitive societies which are amassed into great drifts as it were, with imprecise boundaries. Furthermore what is striking in the history of this concept is that it has varied little in its usefulness since the time of Lewis H. Morgan (1877), when many discoveries in this field since then have added to and accentuated its imprecision and the difficulties associated with it. From its content has disappeared by a kind of internal collapse what was directly tied to the speculative notions of Morgan, for example, the idea of a necessary order of succession of matrilineal, then patrilineal systems, notions which are nowadays outdated in the eyes of everyone, even Morgan's intellectual heirs.

The difficulty is not with an isolated concept, but rather with its roots in an approach to problems which will necessarily produce the same kind of theoretical difficulties so long as it structures scientific work. In the case of Service and Sahlins this method is that of neo-evolutionist empiricism, and it adds the limitations of the one to the weaknesses of the other. All empiricists have a tendency to reduce the analysis of societies to making manifest the visible traits of their functioning, and then to group them under various concepts according to the presence or absence of certain of those traits chosen as checkpoints, but

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they are threatened with falling into a dilemma without egress from the exception and the rule.

Neo-evolutionists use abstract results, products of the empirical operations of the classification and the denomination of societies, to construct a hypothetical schema of the evolution of human society. This schema is not constructed from the results of an analysis of the *real* evolution of societies serving as illustrations, but is constructed logically from conclusions drawn from the study of the evolution of nature, and particularly of the evolution of living beings. Neo-evolutionist empiricists never take completely seriously the phenomena of reversibility, still less the phenomena of devolution which exist in the evolution of societies, and regard this evolution almost exclusively as a *general* and *one-way* movement, a forward advance in general stages (with the exception, however, of Julian Steward and a few others who see in evolution a multilinear phenomenon). Now there is no evolution without devolution, and no evolution in one direction without the possibility of evolution in one or several other directions; there is no evolution 'in general,' nor is there any real 'general evolution' of humanity. Humanity is not a person, nor are societies, and their histories, or History itself, are not those of the development of a germ or an organism. To reiterate a phrase of Marx, "World history has not always been; history considered as world history is a result." (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 173). Faced with these facts which force us to grasp at once the continuity and the breaks, the formal resemblances and the functional and structural differences, we must use a method which helps us to avoid reducing observed social and historical realities to progressively finer abstractions, but which enables us to represent in thought their internal structures and to discover their laws of reproduction and non-reproduction, or of change. For that, we must push research to the point of determining the specific causality of each structure or structural level. Yet in order that these efforts be brought to fruition the relative autonomy of each level must be recognized, and the articulation in the form and the content of these structures must be explored. We must then go to the heart of the structural analysis of the forms of social relationships towards a structural theory of the functions and the modes of articulation of social structures. The final problem

is that of determining the hierarchy of these functions at the heart of these societies, and the differential causality of each structure upon other structures and upon the reproduction of their functions and their connections.

Now, if there exists a *differential* causality of structures, the decisive problem of a comparative theory of societies, and of their structures as well as their history, is to determine the cause which is the determinant in the *final* analysis and thus of priority in reality, neither being unique nor excluding these structural arrangements or their transformations. From Marx to Morgan, from Morgan to Firth and from Firth to Sahlins, despite the differences between these authors, this most significant differential causality has been sought in the direction of the material base of societies (the neolithic revolution, the industrial revolution etc.) or in the direction of their economic structure. It is in carrying out such analyses that one can precisely determine the scientific part of the concept of tribe, or of 'tribal society,' on condition, of course, that one give up using these procedures on societies which are isolated from their contexts, and resolve to use them on limited sets of neighboring societies or to work, in the words of Herbert S. Lewis, on specific and limited phylogenies. By degrees there will be reconstructed on a steadier foundation not only a theory of the evolution of societies, but also a theory of kinship, of religion and of politics in their specific structural connections with the logic of various modes of production.

CHANGING THE GROUND AND THE TERMS OF THE PROBLEM

Should we thus be surprised that in undertaking to make the concept of tribe explicit and to survey briefly its history we have exposed in the stock of treatises and daily work of anthropologists theoretically contradictory inner worlds and silently reproduced and settled habits of thought which, for the most part, have become paths leading nowhere? In order to unravel this history and to carry out the critical evaluation of the concept of tribe one must do more than forever to analyze to a greater degree the states of affairs that it designates; one must know in some way how to read into the very substance

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of the concept clear cleavages which correspond, not to different properties of the states of affairs to which it points, but to different 'effects of thought', that is to say, to the effects of different ways in which thought *is put to use* or works with the raw material of its representations. What is the raw material of the concept of tribe? It is the more or less elaborated representation in thought and language of a 'general form' in which the social relationships of a certain number—very large nevertheless—of contemporary societies or those of antiquity appear. This 'general form' is that of kinship relationship and its very 'generality' suggests that kinship relationships play or played a leading role in these societies.

The difficulties of the empirical concept of tribe owe, it seems, to the fact that this 'general form' in which the social relationships typical of certain societies appear does not only *show the appearance* of these social relationships but suggests at the same time something concerning their nature and their internal connections or, at least, that, from the fact that it makes these social relationships appear *only* as aspects of kinship, it prevents one from *seeing otherwise* what it shows and from *seeing other than* what it shows. The problem thus concerns abstract thought and arises from its acceptance or refusal to follow in the directions indicated by the appearances of things.

For this reason the 'difficulties' of the concept of 'tribe' or of 'tribal society' are not isolated or unique. They are found in other forms once one makes explicit the neighboring, if not related, concepts of 'band' or 'state-society,' that is to say, concepts which designate other 'forms' in which the social relationships of other societies appear and with which certain individuals build general schemata of the social evolution of humanity. For this reason one cannot hope to 'improve upon' the concept of tribe separately or to cure it of its ills before considering the subsequent concepts and improving upon them one after the other. It is necessary—and this is a veritable revolution in theory—that thought 'abandon the ground' of appearances and completely change the terms of the problems without failing to resolve them *as they present themselves*. At least thought must see the problems where it believes the solutions to be found. Now the new terms in which the question must be formulated are: What determines the fact that in certain

societies kinship relationships play a leading role and give to all social relationships and to society their general form? What determines the fact that in other societies (the Aztec or Inca theocracies for example) politico-ideological relationships play a leading role and impregnate all social relationships, give society its general form etc.? It is in this direction that Sahlins and other authors have moreover channelled their efforts, searching in the area of the "forms of the neolithic economy," the "familial mode of production" or the "lineal mode of production" which characterize them, for the answer to the question of the exact nature of 'tribal society' and of its forms of appearance. Their error does not lie there, to our mind. It lies elsewhere, in the fact that they have not really analyzed these modes of production, that they have not continued *to describe them in the forms in which they appeared* and that they have been doomed to being unable either to show or to analyze the specific structural causality, that is to say, 'the final determining action' of these diverse modes of production upon the other levels of organization of these societies and upon their modes of appearance or their general forms.

For these reasons one cannot be rid of the difficulties accompanying the content of the concept of tribe either by arbitrarily ordering the death of the concept and silently burying it or by stigmatizing as abject empiricists those who continue to use it. So long as new concepts are not introduced to resolve these problems, which the concept does not pose but which are posed in connection with the states of affairs which it designates, this concept will reappear in more or less refined forms and will continue to render the same kind of good or bad service. Only when it will have *lost its object* will it yield its place and subsist as the trace of a way of thinking which will always be held out to spontaneous thought but which scientific thought will have learned to distrust and to pass up.