THE MINIMAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT.—The fundamental units of a normal (integrated) society are the tribe (or nation) and the family.

The thesis proposed here is that each normal society, large or small, primitive or highly advanced, ancient or modern, consists of a larger comprehensive unit and a number of constituent families. There are usually one or more additional units but those noted are essential to a human society.

If, as has been suggested elsewhere, the original customs of the first societies were habits already practiced by the prehuman primate species, these habits differed from the customs in one important respect. The latter in addition to being habitual were sanctioned, that is, they were recognized as a criterion of proper behavior. Thus the "natural family" became the human family, headed by the father. The habitual gathering of neighboring families became the independent unit of culture; the family, the inviolable social unit (Deuel, 1966, p. 17).

While anthropologists generally agree that the family is a universal social unit, they do not always recognize the essential role played by the tribe among hunting peoples. The band of hunting peoples is often looked upon as an independent society and the tribe as of no real significance in the culture. "Each such [Andaman] community which will be spoken of here as a 'local group', was independent and autonomous, leading its own life and *regulating its own affairs.*" (Radcliffe-Brown 1933, p. 22. Deuel's italics).

An American anthropologist concluded from his field work some years ago that primitive peoples in sparsely settled areas were organized into autonomous land-owning patrilineal bands. Composite bands (consisting of unrelated families) were similarly ordered.

He further concluded that a free society could not be less than a family. While, at times, a family might be seasonally an independent unit, it could not, on account of commonly occurring social and economic conditions, exist generally except as a part of a group of families or a band (Steward 1936, pp. 332, 338, 343; 1955 pp. 122-150).

As a result of recent research, Dr. Steward now holds that the family, though not necessarily a land-owning group, may have been the minimal society (Personal communication).

The reasons for concluding that these territorially-fixed migratory bands are true autonomous societies

are easy to discover. The landowning and defensive powers which are attributes of the modern Western state lend color to the claim of the local group to sovereignty. Local groups forgather with one another. At times they quarrel and fight with weapons. The tribe as a unit has no dealings with other tribes nor does it wage war against them. It has no power to intervene in the operation of the local group even were internal disorder to occur. At tribal gatherings, the elders (influential men of the various bands) have no policing power to restrain those who would disturb the peace between groups; they are sanctioned merely to use their sagacity, prestige and persuasive talents to induce groups and individuals to obey custom. Though the elders in such endeavors, supported by public opinion, are almost invariably successful, this is not, to the Western mind, government.

Although the family seems thus to stand out in bold relief as the essential social unit of primitive (hunting) peoples, it is the tribe that ethnologists naturally seek first to identify and isolate for study. "The social anthropologist does this fairly simply. . . . He generally takes the abstractions made by the savages themselves. I go into a savage country and say . . . 'what language do you talk?' They give me the name of their language, 'We are the Kariera people:' They have given themselves a name. Then I ask, 'Do these people over the river speak Kariera also?' 'Yes.' 'Are those people over the hump Kariera?' 'No.' They will offer details, and they will mark off for you a definite territory, and people who talk the same language, and say those are Kariera. On the whole, language usually constitutes the line of demarcation. There is a single region which can be described as Kariera by the fact that Kariera is spoken there. There are also certain bodies of common usages which again you can describe as characteristics of these people. Therefore I can get a convenient unit which is of a people territorially delimited, speaking a common language, having common usages, and define this as my unit of study." (Radcliffe-Brown 1957, p. 61-2).

"An ethnographic survey of the world demonstrates that on every continent there are well-defined boundaries which separate, one from the other, units or cultural entities which we anthropologists call tribes. In this sense the unity of such a geographically defined group consists in the homogeneity of culture. Within the boundaries of the tribe the writ of the same culture runs from end to end. The tribesmen all speak the same language, hence accept the same tradition in mythology and customary law, in economic values and in moral principles. With this there runs parallel a similarity of techniques and implements, of tastes and consumers' goods. They fight, hunt, fish, and till the soil with the same type of implements and weapons, and they intermarry according to the same tribal law of matrimony and descent. . . . The tribe as a cultural unit probably existed long before the political tribe became organized on the principle of force." (Malinowski 1944, pp. 60, 61).

There are, however, more cogent cultural ("legal") reasons for main-

taining that the tribe is always present among primitive peoples as an important functioning unit. This is the implication of institutions widely present or universal among them and tribally limited as to jurisdiction—blood vengeance, marriage, political and kinship systems of social control, initiation, land ownership, and cultural training in the family.

Blood vengeance, unlike personal revenge, is a right of the family (local group) to protect itself and defend the natural rights of its members, a custom recognized and accepted throughout the tribe. The family (local group) of the person committing the crime is responsible for the act. The injured family is sanctioned to mete out punishment to the offending group. A feud, should it arise as a result of retribution, is not a custom; it is a violation of cultural regulation. The fear of feuds, common among hunting peoples, is itself a deterrent to this breach of custom.

Among many tribes, additional mechanisms exist to avoid feuding. In some instances, permission is sought of relatives of a man guilty of a crime, before he is executed. Leaders of a local group may at times arrange for another group to kill a non-conformist or very quarrelsome member whose behavior endangers friendly relationships with its neighbors.

The custom of blood vengeance is tribal not familial. The avenging family or local group cannot direct the custom of blood vengeance in its entirety since it has no restraining social authority over the opposing unit. A feud is usually avoided through public opinion, the general tribal feeling that the avenging act was right and just and the unit "punished" should abide by it. The restraint is imposed by the consensus against continuance of the quarrel felt throughout the tribe by virtue of a common cultural training during youth. This carries with it the guarantee that neither unit involved will suffer a loss of social standing.

Marriage among primitive hunting peoples is a contract between two families to establish a third. The contract is bound by the exchange of gifts and/or services which begin in advance and may extend over a considerable period after the marriage proper takes place. Normally these conditions are fulfilled, not because either family can enforce the contract or its provisions, but because the consensus of the whole tribe is that the custom is right and should be carried out in the prescribed manner (Note: As in all normal cultural behavior, there is a desire on the part of those primarily involved to cooperate. This cooperation stems directly from the recognition and acceptance of the rightness of the customs by those participating.)

Initiation ceremonies are rites which mark the arrival of the young human male at manhood. Though the ritual observance may be within the local group, it is the customary manner of admitting youth to full membership in the society. The rites are thus tribal, not local, in purpose, as is shown by the acceptance of the successful candidate at tribal gatherings as one of the initiated men, as a man eligible for marriage and for a man's duties generally.

The principle of land ownership by the family (local group) could not be effective except by general acceptance by the tribal units. Cultural training of youth in the family is not a mere family or group matter, it concerns the tribal culture, the customs of all the families.

A final objection to the band as an independent society lies in the nature and source of its authority. Political authority or societal control resides (even in the hunting tribe) in the total society or aggregate of families and emanates downward to the constituent social units. Except among primitive hunting peoples, political authority is coterminous with police powers, the sanction to compel cultural conformity by force.

The authority of the local group, on the other hand, is based on the kinship system. The kinship system of social control is built on terms expressing degrees of relationship and the associated mutual rights and duties between members of the simple family, extended to more distant lineal and collateral relatives, to those related by marriage and even to unrelated families residing locally. The authority flows upward from the simple family to more inclusive kinship bodies to the local group or band. The latter consequently can wield no greater customary powers than those exercised by the family. Police power (blood vengeance for crimes) is an inherent natural right reserved to the family (local group). The phrase "family (local group)" expresses this inseparable relationship in this matter of kinship structure with associated duties and unit powers. Thus the local group can *exercise* the rights of blood vengeance, land ownership, protection of individual's natural rights, etc., but cannot sanction these rights, the family or itself. The aggregate of families can and does sanction the family (local group) as a social unit and its natural rights including the right to defend itself by force. The family, for its part, trains the young to conform to the culture and support the tribal institutions. In this manner the two social units complement and maintain each other.

Since a "natural family" (prehuman primate associational grouping) could not sanction itself, its social condition could only be realized by an aggregate of families, each of which recognized and accepted as right and proper, the same traditional set of customs. Consequently human families can be found only as parts of a larger social body, the tribe or nation, which is regulated by culture. (Note: A family or a local group might, of course, exist for a time as a "free" agent due to historical accident such as the destruction or dispersal of a tribe but from a "social" standpoint it is then in the condition of a "natural family" and its further activities purely of historical concern.)

Contrary to the above line of reasoning, some anthropologists have proposed that man is the true unit of society. "In a social system, the entities are individual human beings, in certain relations, which are differentiated from and isolated from all other relations in the universe. The individuals exist as units, but also, considered through time, are each characterized by a set of related acts of behavior which themselves

constitute a system." (Radcliffe-Brown 1957, p. 43). Without man there could be no culture and no society and therefore (or so the reasoning goes) man must be the unit of society.

A careful review of the earlier argument will reveal that sanction, the vivifying spirit of culture, is not an individual matter nor an aggregate of conscious acceptances but a concert of conviction of the people as a whole (Deuel 1964). While individuals are essential to the operation of culture and society, they do not determine the customs, the social procedures, nor structures; rather they play roles analogous to the living cells that compose and operate the human body, but neither determine the mechanisms nor direct the processes.

Summary

Historically, the family originated in a habitual prehuman primate breeding and rearing association or "natural family." The tribe was probably likewise the outgrowth of a not unusual primate tendency for "natural families" to assemble in a larger body for companionship and/or for common undertakings like the baboon raids on South African orchards (Zuckerman, 1932, pp. 194-6, 198). This aggregate of neighboring scattered groups was casual and its earliest composition may have been variable.

The human family was created through sanctioning by the aggregate of neighboring cooperative "natural families." The family organization, the means to perpetuate it as a social unit, and its rights or the habits by which it maintained itself were sanctioned at the same time. Sanction of the family and its natural habits was effected only by implicit recognition and conviction of their rightness by the aggregate of families, the tribe. Sanction, however, is not a momentary but a continuing conviction.

Consequently the tribe (or society) is essential to insure the perpetuation of the family and the sanction of its natural rights or the culture. The family by training the young from infancy preserves and passes the tribal culture on to succeeding generations. Thus the tribe and family are the mutually supporting social units essential to the establishment and maintenance of a society.

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