

**Andre Gingrich, Siegfried Haas, Sylvia Haas, Gabriele Paleczek  
(Editors)**

# **KINSHIP, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND EVOLUTION**

**Proceedings of a Symposium held  
in Honour of Walter Dostal**



**Verlag Ferdinand Berger & Söhne  
Horn-Wien**

**WIENER BEITRÄGE ZUR ETHNOLOGIE UND ANTHROPOLOGIE**  
**VIENNA CONTRIBUTIONS TO ETHNOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY**

Eigentümer und Herausgeber:  
Institut für Völkerkunde der Universität Wien  
Redaktion: Thomas Fillitz  
Layout und Schriften: Ralph Fichtner

Vol. 5 (1989)

Computer gibt es  
nicht, damit Leute  
weniger zu tun  
haben.

Sondern weil Leute  
Besseres zu tun  
haben.

Besser mit IBM

This publication has partly been produced with "Multi Lingual Scholar"  
which kindly has been put at our disposal by:



Köhler Ingenieurbüro Postwiesen 13  
D-6000 Frankfurt/ -90 Tel.: 069-76 98 29  
Telefax.: 069-768 18 46

Alle Rechte, auch das des photomechanischen Nachdrucks und der Speicherung  
in elektrischen Datenanlagen, vorbehalten.

Copyright 1989 bei Verlag Ferdinand Berger & Söhne, Horn–Wien  
ISBN 3-85028-200-7



Verlag Ferdinand Berger & Söhne  
Horn–Wien



## PRIMITIVE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION (GENERAL AND SPECIFIC)

Vladimir R. Kabo

I would like to point out the main conclusions of my investigations on primitive pre-agricultural social organization.<sup>1</sup> Our Soviet tradition used to consider the gens as the basic social unit of primitive society and the development of gentile organization from matrilineality to patrilineality as dominant line of social evolution.

On the contrary, I consider the community as the fundamental socio-economic unit of primitive society. I think that it was the community that determined the development of primitive society. The social structure of hunters and gatherers in Australia, Tasmania, South-East Asia, South Asia, Central and South Africa, South and North America, offers ample evidence that the community is the main cell of primitive society in defining the functioning and development of the whole social structure

I characterize the primitive community as a group of families who lead a common economic life on their own territory. The existence of a community is cyclic: it disintegrates into smaller groups, which I name economic groups, then integrates again (cycles of fission and fusion). The question of the gens and the correlation of gentile organization with the community I will consider later.

But first of all I would like to discuss the main universal parameters of a community in any geographical region:

- 1) the existence of structural units as family, economic group and temporary task-group
- 2) territoriality
- 3) the dependence of the size and stability of the community on the ecological conditions of production
- 4) the connectedness of the community to a defined ecosystem
- 5) predominance of collective ownership of land and natural resources
- 6) predominance of collectivism in social life and in food obtaining alongside with individual food obtaining and intra-familial distribution
- 7) adequate food distribution (nobody is left out)
- 8) division of labour according to age, gender and emerging individual specialization
- 9) intercommunity economic exchange
- 10) community self-awareness of its members

I shall discuss some of these parameters in more detail. The existence form of a primitive hunting and gathering community is a combination of temporary economic groups consisting of single families. Moreover, a community distinguishes within itself various temporary task groups differing in gender and age and serving to perform clearly defined economic and other tasks.

The main components of primitive social structure can already be found among the Tasmanians, the most archaic of the societies known to ethnography. These include a community, a family, an economic group and a task group. A more complex communal structure incorporates two levels formed by a lower and a higher community.<sup>2</sup> Communal mobility, the balance between a settled and a nomadic life-style is in fact an adaptation to changing external conditions, to cyclic natural patterns.



The community is first of all a leading production collective trying to pertain its structure, composition and relative numbers according to production requirements. A universal feature of a primitive community is its territoriality, i. e. more or less persistent attachment to a certain territory being economically developed by it, with the upper and lower social formations (families, aggregates of communities, tribes) also tending towards territoriality. The flexible socio-territorial organization of hunters and gatherers is well adapted to the conditions of economic activities. A community is one of the most important structures created by a primitive society to socially adapt itself to a changing ecological environment. It is linked with a certain ecological niche and makes part of a certain ecosystem. Depending on local conditions, this system accepts various forms even for a single comparatively small people, for example, the Tasmanians or the Andamanese.

Though variably, territoriality is characteristic of all hunting and food-gathering peoples, but its realization differs. Generally, under communalism, all lands are clearly delineated and safeguarded. However, in ecologically complex conditions the borders of communal territories are not so very clear and the territories of neighbouring communities partly overlap. Land and other resources are distributed so as to provide favourable conditions for all neighbouring communities throughout the year. This is facilitated by exchanging resources on a mutual basis. When a drought spells hunger to a community the latter may find means of subsistence on the land of its neighbours with whom they maintain friendly and reciprocal ties, as well as the relations of kinship and matrimony. Mutual assistance is a remarkable feature of communalism, covering both its economic and non-economic spheres.

In the last instance, the size and relative stability of communities depend on the conditions of production, i. e. on the natural environment and on hunting technology,<sup>3</sup> as well as on the level of territoriality and the nature of relations inside a community.

Under pre-agricultural communalism, all land and its resources, being the main means of production, belong to a community. Communal land ownership, in combination with personal ownership of items for individual and family use, forms the basis for primitive socio-economic structure. In certain cases we come across pieces of communal land being conditionally owned by a family. Tribes and two-level communities have a correspondingly hierarchical land ownership. Sometimes, land owners are those members of a community who comprise its core. The Australians have kinship groups or a kinship nucleus of a community recognized as land owner; Bushmen have a consanguineal land ownership according to which land belongs to a group of blood kinsmen or a kin nucleus of a community. However, we should distinguish the land being factual economic property of a whole community and the land being property of a group of people recognized as such by themselves and by the society to which they belong. The demand for food and its distribution predominantly require a collective effort, supplemented by individual food obtaining and intrafamily distribution. Distribution depends on the outcome of individual and collective efforts, and on some other factors - mainly the dominant relations inside a community and between communities. It is in fact a reflection of the total of intracommunal and intercommunal relations and links.

Adequate food distribution offers only certain advantages to elderly people and specialists, bringing about certain social inhomogeneity inherent in a primitive society. It can be seen among the Tasmanians and reaches a relatively well developed state among the Californian Indians. However, a primitive



society knows no proprietary and social stratification, yet certain prerequisites for it are taking shape among the Californian Indians. The leading position of males in a primitive society can in no way be regarded as an element of social inequality. Equality, cooperation and collectivism are the strong points of a primitive society. The social status of its members slightly varies, depending mainly on gender, age, experience and personal abilities. Primordial democratism which does not exclude social specialization and resultant differences in the position of groups and individuals is a characteristic feature of a primitive community.

In a primitive pre-agricultural society, two types of social division of labour should be distinguished, that within a community, based on gender and age differences, and that between communities, based on the differences in ecological conditions and in cultural traditions. Exchange between individuals (within a community), between communities or tribes combine economic and social tendencies. Among the Australians, the Bushmen and some other peoples, there is a recurrent and systematic interexchange of resources between contiguous communities.

A relatively stable internal structure, autonomy and economic autarchy of a community, and concentration of information links within it, produce a number of distinctive features: these are a language for intra-group communication, specific phenomena in the field of material and spiritual culture, and finally the differentiation between one's own and other collectives and communities (self-awareness and self-designation). These phenomena form a distinctive borderline between communities which is evident among the Australians, the Bushmen and other peoples. The tribe at this stage of development is a forming ethno-social entity which is mainly a territorial unit of communities having common ancestors and cultural heritage. Usually, it does not form a single whole, neither politically nor economically. The boundaries of a language and of a tribe do not always coincide. At the same time, the communities forming a tribe are autonomous economic and political units. That is why the community is the main socio-economic cell of society decisive for the development of self-awareness of its members. Other forms of self-identification (tribal etc.) are believed to be secondary. Man's self-determination in such a society has a clear-cut localized and communal nature. The community being an ethno-social entity bearing the main ethnic properties historically precedes the tribe in this particular function. Cultural and language traditions of a community are maintained by a stable nucleus consisting of people born in the community - a nucleus of the lineage among the Australians and a nucleus of bilaterally related kinsmen among the Bushmen. Being the main socio-economic unit, the hunting and gathering community historically is the earliest ethnic entity. The ethnogenetic factors of a social entity therefore are formed on a solid and stable social basis.

The peoples mentioned so far represent various economic and cultural types and are very inhomogeneous as far as their cultural adaptation and social development, including communal evolution, are concerned. This brings forth a remarkable fact that whatever geographic and historical environment, traditional pre-agricultural communities as instruments for social adaptation have common structural and functional principles. This is a foundation for variations developed by the hunting and gathering community



adapting itself over several millennia to a changing world. This foundation enables a poorly equipped society to survive in a harsh "threshold" environment. The primitive society makes up for inadequate technology using a reliable and functionally flexible social organization centred around a community. A flexible communal organization, periodically changing population and composition, is very advantageous under the conditions of hunting and gathering. It accounts for seasonal changes and the specifics of the available resources and moreover, it relieves socially stressful situations. Both economic groups and communities have a broadly varying size. However, their variability has limits. A very small group is incapable of solving its economic and social problems, while an excessively large group requires more labour to maintain itself and is often the cause of socio-psychological tension developing into open conflicts. The size and composition of a community often depends on the number of adult hunters. However, introvert and extrovert phases resulting from changing ecology have both social and economic meaning. This is amply seen from the big group phase among the *Eskimo* peoples which is filled with seal hunting and intensive social life. The same is true of the Australians, the Bushmen and other hunting and gathering peoples.

I differentiate two basic structures of the primitive pre-agricultural society, namely the community and the kinship group. The community is the main unit of production and at the same time the subject of the property in land because in primitive pre-class society, land is the object of property of the group who works on the land and appropriates the products of its work. This group consists not only of the members of one gens (if there exists gens-organization at all), but also of the members of other communities and therefore of other gentes - for example the wives of the male members of the community. In the history of primitive society the community as the fundamental social institution engenders such institutions as kinship groups, and the latter sometimes regard themselves as owners of the land. But in such cases the community is all the same the owner of land in the economic sense of the word.

I differentiate also two types of exogamy - the gens and the community exogamy. The gens exogamy is one of the main attributes of the gens. The community exogamy is the property of the early type of community only, the community of hunter-gatherers. It is not based on blood relationships as gens exogamy but on social relationships - on the partnership in the community. Contrary to gens exogamy, the community exogamy is not so strict and allows exceptions. I suppose that historically, the community and community exogamy is the base and condition of the origin of the gens and gens exogamy.

Kin relationships play a great role in the formation of the primitive communities. The core of the community among the *!Kung San (xausy)* is a group of adult siblings, men and women with their wives and husbands; the majority of the community members trace descent ties through them. Ties of blood relationship are universal (though not the only) structural factors of the community organization. The gens organization is formed on the system of ties of blood relationship, and in the end (in the final analysis) on the basis of the community. And as the gens organization is progressing historically, it plays in the society the more important part.

The structural-formative importance of blood ties within the society and between societies is obvious from the system of fictive kinship.<sup>4</sup>



There are two main types of the correlation between community and kinship organization, two types of communities: 1) the local clan community, based on a localized clan, and 2) the heterogeneous community, consisting of representatives of some unlocalized kinship groups. In Australia the localized clan usually is connected with clan territory by totemic and mythological ties. The community is connected with community land by economic ties.

Because the tribes in pre-agricultural society, for example Australian aboriginal tribes, were chiefly endogamous and numerically small, every member was, in fact, a blood relative to all others. Every adult member of a tribe knew all other members of the tribe. It is a logical conclusion that kinship terminology as used by the Aborigines, expresses blood relationships. The scientific expression "classificatory systems of relationships" obviously dealt with blood relationships. But it was only obviously. In reality it is not absolute. For example, marriages are not only based on kinship but also on locality. The local group or community membership indeed played a role in who married whom. It is part of a problem of the socio-economic organization or, more specifically the way in which local groups as the main economic units were integrated into the socio-economic organization. There is another problem: what is the role played by the classificatory system of relationship in this organization? There is even the opinion expressed by some authors<sup>3</sup>, that the classificatory system of relationship was not an expression of blood relationship but the codification of the economic basis of the society. This implies that marriage was not determined - as far as the Aborigines are concerned by blood relationship of the local groups of the partners. I think it is an extreme opinion, but there is a lot of truth in it. David Turner<sup>6</sup> in his interpretation of the classificatory system of relationship in Northern Australia portrayed the kinship terminology in terms of relations between the local groups.

One methodological remark: I disagree with the characterization of my conception as evolutionistic. On the contrary, I tried to overcome the evolutionistic traditions of Soviet science. Evolutionism can be characterized by immanent evolution of social and cultural forms, speculative reconstruction, so-called survivals etc.: I however try to retrace the development of socio-economic conditions as the basis of social and ideological evolution in general. One must differentiate evolutionism as a theory and evolution as a matter of fact.<sup>7</sup>

## REFERENCES

- 1 As outlined in Kabo 1986
- 2 For instance among certain Australian tribes, among the *Veddas* and some other peoples.
- 3 Cf. e. g. the differences between the bow-hunting *Pygmies* and the net-hunting *Pygmies*.
- 4 E. g. in Australia, or the system of name-relationships among the Bushmen.
- 5 Cf. e.g. Rose 1987
- 6 Cf. Turner 1974



- 7 E. g. I differentiate two stages in the development of the gens: the gens of hunter-gatherers (one may call it "totemic gens") and the gens of the early agriculturists - the genealogical gens. The two general types of gens organization, based on the development of socio-economic organization, are in my opinion real historical facts, not speculation. (Cf. Testart 1988)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

KABO, V. R.:

1986

Первобытная доземледельческая община .  
Moscow

ROSE, F.:

1987

The Traditional Mode of Production of the Australian Aborigines.  
Sydney

TESTART, A.:

1988

Some Major Problems in the Social Anthropology of Hunter-Gatherers.  
Current Anthropology, Vol. 29, No. 1 : 1-31.

TURNER, D.:

1974

Tradition and Transformation. A Study of the Groote Eylandt Area  
Aborigines.  
Canberra