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# Studies in Ethnography and Anthropology

Papers presented by  
Soviet participants

Part II



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**USSR ACADEMY OF SCIENCES  
N.N. MIKLUKHO–MAKLAY INSTITUTE OF ETHNOGRAPHY**

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SOCIETY AND CULTURE OF HUNTERS AND GATHERERS: THE COMMON  
AND THE SPECIFIC

Recent theoretical thought in the field of social anthropology has had a considerable shift. Whereas in the recent past it was dominated by a sceptical, if not downright negative, attitude to the very possibility of interpreting archaeological materials concerning ancient hunters and gatherers proceeding from ethnographic data obtained from modern backward societies, increasing numbers of researchers today believe this both permissible and possible. Common consensus, however, is limited to acknowledgement of the pressing necessity to improve the set of methods of this sort of reconstructions. Evidence of the said shift is furnished by a large number of appropriate theoretical articles, collections of articles and books published in the last two decades in different countries. The Chicago Symposium on modern and ancient hunters and gatherers held in 1966, which was summed up in the book *Man the Hunter* (1968), was followed by several other international conferences on these and related problems. The materials of two of these conferences, which took place in Canada, were published in 1969.

Increasing importance has been given to the method of ethno-archaeology, based on a synthesis between ethnographic and archaeological study of the same cultural and historical tradition, which has been successfully developed in recent years. However, particularly promising for the attainment of more versatile aims is the method of ethnographic modelling (J.Yellen, M.A.Jochim, etc.). The author has outlined its advantages/see *Teoreticheskiye problemy rekonstruktsii pervobytnosti* (Theoretical

Problems of Reconstruction of Primitive History). In: *Etnografiya kak istochnik rekonstruktsii pervobytnogo obschestva* (Ethnography as a Source of Reconstruction of the History of Primitive Society) Moscow, 1979/. This method is based in its turn on the comparative historical method, on an extensive use of data pertaining to different societies and on a comparative analysis of these data aimed at disclosing in them the common and the specific features or universalia, on the one hand, and of features inherent only in individual societies, on the other. It is also based on the construction of abstract ethnographic models exhibiting no specific ethnographic features, but suitable for comparison with archaeological materials.

Numerous ethnographic data pertaining to all hunter-gatherer regions of the world - Australia and Tasmania, South-East and South Asia, South and Central Africa, South and North America, and the Polar zone - show that the organizational principles of the social structures traditional for peoples at this level of socio-economic development are identical irrespective of the natural, geographic and other conditions of life. Consequently, these principles bear a universal character. These structures exhibit plasticity and adaptability to changing conditions. They are dependent on the primary universal adaptive dynamic system, whose core is formed by the hunter-gatherer community. The dynamism of this system is expressed in its ability for development and transformation. It serves as base for transition to higher levels of socio-economic development. Finally, they fall into surface and deep structures. The latter appear on the basis of predominantly socio-economic relations necessary for the very existence of society.

The components of primitive cultures form two large blocks. One of these shows an infinite variability of elements with unique combinations between them, which has arisen in the course of society's active adaptation to the specific conditions of its life. The other, on the contrary, has a single type. It is founded on the basic production team of primitive society - the community, a relatively stable social form which sensitively reacts to all changes in the natural environment. Being combined, these two blocks display both the unity and the diversity of the primitive society as a social and cultural entity. The traditional hunter-gatherer societies, whose his-

torical development proceeded in different geographical and historical conditions, are of a type in practically everything that is part of the social and economic conditions of their existence and some of these societies display profound differences in many other aspects. However much the traditional primitive societies' conditions of life may have varied, their social and economic structure preserved its basic structural unity. This provides a stable foundation which enables society to preserve itself in any conditions.

As a universal phenomenon which contains regular features of social and historical development, this second block makes it possible to reconstruct with great authenticity the social life (primarily its socio-economic basis) of ancient hunters and gatherers who are studied by archaeology. The proposed approach will help to disclose the internal, deep mechanisms, tendencies and regularities which lie at the heart of social life. The limits imposed on the original ethnographic data in terms of some specific parameters can make the procedure for reconstruction of ancient society still more meaningful. For instance, the caribou hunters - the Nunamiut Eskimos and the Nabesna, Montagnais-Naskapie and the northern Athapascan-Chipe-wyan Indians as a whole constitute a certain economic-cum-cultural and social-cum-historical type. Grouped together with the Nganasans who are akin to them in their conditions of life and in their economic activity, they can form the groundwork for the construction of a certain ethnographic model. In its turn, this latter will serve as basis for the reconstruction of a certain stage of primitive history in certain ecological conditions, such as those in the life of the Late Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunters of Europe.

The modern hunter-gatherer community familiar to us from the ethnographic materials, must have mostly taken shape in the late Palaeolithic period. The dwellings and settlements of that period - the most important source for the archaeologically based reconstruction of social organization - have been studied with particular intensity in the USSR.

The first, and most wide-spread, type of the late Palaeolithic dwelling is what in the plan looks like a round or oval structure with one hearth. Very often, dwellings of this type form more or less permanent or seasonal settlements of a whole

community. People in those days circumscribed their sphere of habitation out of the surrounding world, with this small world within this artificial circle becoming Man's microcosm and his most immediate social and productive environment. Of great interest is the Malta site studied by M.M.Gerasimov and A.A.Forozov near Irkutsk, where the scientists discovered fourteen round and elongated dwellings. The area of this Late Palaeolithic settlement, unusual in size and in the number of houses, exceeded 1,100 square metres. It had the greatest number of dwellings in a Palaeolithic settlement ever known. It was centred around a house which was bigger than the others. Apparently, the site was either an agglomeration of small half-dug-outs around the communal centre or one settlement made up of dwellings designed for two seasons - one for the winter (a winter community long house) and one for the summer (smaller summer dwellings of family groups), like the settlements of the modern Northern and Far Eastern peoples.

The long dwellings of the second type consisted of several round or oval houses which were placed wall to wall and which had several hearths and served as the home for several families of one community where they spent the long winter together. A further development of the dwellings of this type were vast structures, each with an area of 500-800 square metres, those, for instance, which formed entire settlements of large communities discovered by P.P.Yefimenko and other archaeologists in Kostenki. In the Late Palaeolithic period such settlements could exist in localities which were particularly good for hunting and gathering. However, even these settlements were most probably seasonal in character.

The construction of Late Palaeolithic dwellings and maintenance of live fire in them required perfect forms of labour organization. The life of a human group in close interaction with each other for a long time required a certain amount of developed social links and a consolidation of the primitive social medium. Proceeding from the living space and number of dwellings one can estimate the number of communities. The area of a small dwelling, whether round or oval in the plan, seldom exceeded 25 square metres. A dwelling such as this could hardly accommodate more than 15 people. Information available about the Indians of California indicate a minimum floor

space per person of 1.8 square metres. In addition, part of the space is occupied by the fire. Observations among the Nganasans in the severe north show that even here the per capita living space is 4-8 square metres. Consequently, a settlement of two small dwellings could have a maximum population of 30. Up to a 100 people could live in the long dwelling with 10 fire places at Kostenki IV, whose area was around 200 square metres. The estimated number of inhabitants in the settlements of small houses and in the long houses roughly equals the population of modern hunter-gatherer communities. Such estimates should take into account that the variability of the latter is as dependent on the diversity of the natural conditions and other factors as it was in the Palaeolithic period. Many Late Palaeolithic communities enjoyed more favourable ecological conditions than modern hunters, as they had more biomass per capita of the population. As a result, their communities could be more numerous.

Archaeologists also know Late Palaeolithic settlements with only one small house with one fire. Built for use over a number of years, a settlement like this must have served a small economic group who were part of a community which they had left for economic reasons. In the worst part of the year, modern hunters and gatherers are known to live by themselves for long spells of time sometimes lasting for months. They form units or live as individual families, subsequently re-joining the rest of the community. Apparently, the same occurred in the Late Palaeolithic period. As the productive forces and related social processes evolved, the isolation of economic units and, subsequently, of individual families also became possible within a seasonal or long-term settlement of an entire Late Palaeolithic community. It can be assumed that at one time small dwellings also served individual families who tended to live in economic and cultural isolation. This was connected with the gradual increase in the economic independence of a family. Estimates say that the one-hearth Malta Palaeolithic chum, or tepee which was four metres in diameter housed 8-10 people, who must have formed an individual family. In many Late Palaeolithic sites in both Eastern and Western Europe groups of kindred families, who at first lived in small one-hearth dwellings, became in a later era concentrated in long communal dwell-

lings. The models for the evolution of a social links were as different in the Late Palaeolithic period as they are among the modern hunters and gatherers. They also reflected in different ways the development of the productive forces, demographic tendencies and epochal changes in the natural conditions which could force individual families to live together in one house.

Impressive settlements of Late Palaeolithic communities include by sites of Pavlov, Dolní Veštonice and Předmosti in Czechoslovakia. In Dolní Veštonice a round hut was discovered standing apart from the other dwellings. It was six metres in diameter and had a kiln for firing ritual clay figurines. The hut must have been the home and workshop of a primitive shaman sculptor. His secluded life and syncretic image are a lively reminder of a witch-doctor and master smith known in many archaic cultures. The ritual dwelling of the Late Palaeolithic community unearthed in Dolní Veštonice is not the only one of its kind. In Mezin, archaeologists uncovered a round dwelling of mammoth bones, which, according to S.N. Bibikov, was used as a community ritual centre. It contained musical instruments made of bone.

Community settlements and big community dwellings for use over a number of years were built only in places with favourable ecological conditions where the people sought settled life. Big multi-hearth dwellings indicate the presence of communal collectivism and collective communal economy. Groups of small huts which formed whole settlements also point to a social integration among a primitive community. However, the individual small families who formed a community or groups of small families (economic units) could lead an economically autonomous life within a socially integrated entity. It was these family groups that formed the basic structural elements of long dwellings in the same way as the small huts were the structural elements of the long houses. This does not mean, however, that a family in Late Palaeolithic societies was something self-contained. As in modern hunter-gatherer communities, the individual families enjoyed fairly conventional autonomy, with the families being firmly linked with the community. Regular big animal hunting characteristic of the Late Palaeolithic period necessitated a well-organized collective effort at times involving the entire community, which was pos-



sible only at a fairly high level of integration among the entire primitive economic unit. This necessitated stable social links within the community, the stability of this latter and the common life of its members during a considerable part of the annual cycle. All-community participation was also required for the construction of big houses, as in the case of the Eskimos, the Aleutians and some others. The level of social integration achieved in that period had been prepared by the entire development of the primitive community, which lasted thousands of years. The community as a stable form of socio-economic organization of the primitive social medium served as the basis and the vital condition for its very existence throughout this period.

Archaeological materials make it possible to trace the formation of the different types of social and cultural adaptation to different objective conditions of primitive food-gathering society as early as the Late Palaeolithic period. This in its turn, allows us to assume that there was some variability in the types of social development. The culture, some forms of social organization and the mode of life among the ancient inhabitants of circumglacial Europe and the Mediterranean subtropics were apparently as different as, for instance, the culture of the modern aborigines in California is from that of the Eskimos. However, they had a basically common communal structure. Apparently, the same pattern prevailed in the Palaeolithic period.

Serving as the foundation of life in the primitive community in the same way as the communal exogamy, such phenomena as the social integration, a certain measure of transition to settled life, the division of labour according to age and sex and in terms of space and time, the economic association with a certain territory, the communal ownership of land, and the collective distribution of the game after hunts were functionally inter-related and formed a certain socio-economic pattern known from the ethnographic data. Its emergence and development can be established by archaeologists.