

Tribalism and the Plural Society

An Inaugural Lecture

GIVEN IN THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF
RHODESIA AND NYASALAND

J. C. Mitchell

TRIBALISM
AND THE
PLURAL SOCIETY

*An Inaugural Lecture
given in the University College of
Rhodesia and Nyasaland
on 2 October 1959*

by

J. C. MITCHELL
Professor of African Studies

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
OF RHODESIA
SALISBURY
1966

TRIBALISM AND THE PLURAL SOCIETY

I

ANTHROPOLOGISTS start from the premiss that all customs and beliefs, however bizarre and incomprehensible they may appear to be to outsiders, nevertheless have a rational and sensible basis to them. The Inaugural Lecture, I should think, falls exactly into this category of customs and it is incumbent upon me, perhaps, first of all to reveal to you the logical basis to this particular piece of ritual. Before I start, however, I want to assure you that I assume that this ritual performance is no different from any other I have attended and that the participants—that is yourselves and myself—would like to get the formal performances over and move to the beer-drinking stage as soon as possible.

The Inaugural Lecture is a *rite de passage*—that is, it is a piece of ritual which formally marks a man's passage from one status in society to another. It has all the characteristics of the true rite of passage. The separation stage started several weeks ago when I disappeared from College precincts and my family found me incarcerated in my study to late hours. We are now undergoing the transition stage and I hope that in a short while we shall be in the aggregation phase over a cup of coffee.

During the last three years the Professor of African Studies has not existed; it is this act which brings him into being. Presumably also the Department, of which he is the head, has also not existed—a fact which will not surprise the more cynical of my colleagues but which will certainly surprise some of my students who have been wrestling

with the Australian eight-class marriage system over the last year or two.

Like any other ritual, the Inaugural Lecture is conducted in a standardized and institutionalized way. Normally the new incumbent is expected, like the Trobrianders, to croon lovingly over the exhumed bones of his predecessors, and then, having reinterred them, to turn his eyes to the children and try to show them where the future lies.

My own position here is a little anomalous. Firstly, like my colleagues who have suffered this ritual before me, I am the first incumbent of a particular Chair at this College; I therefore have no immediate predecessors whose contributions I might scrutinize—I have no bones I might fondle. Secondly, most of my colleagues have been able to talk about subjects which are already fairly well known to the general public, since they are usually included in school curricula. My own subject is not widely known and few people outside academic circles or those directly concerned with African Administration have any clear knowledge of the subject-matter. I do not intend to give you a formal description of the content of the subject in this lecture, but I hope nevertheless that you will be able to gather what sort of topic falls into my purview.

From one point of view I am better off than my colleagues. I am in the happy position of having behind me the work of my colleagues of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute at Lusaka. Their solid and penetrating research, and the publication of a series of outstanding monographs over the last twenty-one years, has brought social anthropological studies here to a level unequalled elsewhere in Africa. This has enormously simplified my task of establishing a Department of African Studies. In a sense perhaps the previous Directors of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute

are my predecessors. To them I owe a great debt—the late Godfrey Wilson, Professor Max Gluckman of Manchester University, and Professor Elizabeth Colson of Brandeis University. Professor Gluckman in particular taught me and most of my colleagues in the Rhodes–Livingstone Institute, so that in many ways the Department owes much to him.

You will have noticed that my Chair is in African Studies. I feel it might be useful if I were to sketch in a little of the background to the existence of this remarkable subject in a university institution. The university, as we know it, is an institution devoted to European Studies in the sense that the subjects normally included in the curricula of study are those which have arisen in the course of the development of the universities in Western Europe. Modern Languages, Classics, History, the Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and the Social Sciences as topics of study at the university are part and parcel of the great heritage of Western European learning; they have their roots in Western European Culture. The Inaugural Board which did the early planning of this University College, however, had the wisdom to see that, whatever society eventually grows up here in Central Africa, it will draw for its substance not only from the cultural heritage of Western Europe but also from the heritage of the indigenous Bantu peoples who, although living a life vastly different from that of the White races, nevertheless have much in their traditional way of life which is worth preserving and which in the long run will probably prove to be more specifically Rhodesian than many of those features which we share with other peoples of Western European origin. Therefore, the Inaugural Board decided that amongst the first of the Departments to be established in the College should be one devoted to African Studies.

It is likely that no two people are going to agree on what constitutes African Studies. This vagueness is an advantage from my point of view; it leaves me free to make my own definition. I have taken it to mean, in a broad sense, that my Department should provide a niche in the College where the African way of life in all its aspects could form the object of scholarly study and contemplation. Unfortunately I have to live, and while it was technically open to me to define African Studies as, say, the detailed enumeration of Ndebele praise songs, I fear my colleagues, burdened with shepherding students towards their Bachelor degrees, would not have taken kindly to this suggestion. In short, I had to teach something as well as study something: furthermore, I had to teach something which is acceptable to our parent university as suitable within the framework of the B.A. (General) degree. My choice fell upon social anthropology. This is not surprising. Firstly, it is a subject which is now well established in university tradition with a body of thought and research behind it going back for a century. Secondly, it is a subject which deals in abstract terms with custom and belief, and these are perhaps the first aspects of African life to understand. Thirdly, as a social anthropologist, I could hardly teach anything else and presumably the Board knew this very well when they appointed me.

Therefore, at the moment the Department of African Studies teaches social anthropology, but I hope that in due course when we have the resources available we will be able to widen our field to include the study of other aspects of African life which could be legitimately included in university curricula.

II

Social anthropology was smuggled into university curricula under the commodious cloak of general anthropology, a subject which had gained a certain amount of academic respectability through being associated with such austere disciplines as anatomy and geology. Anthropology, being the study of man, past and present, takes into account not only his body but also his works, his customs, and his beliefs. Through time social anthropology, which specializes in man's customs and beliefs, has come to be a separate discipline with little more than a cordial nodding acquaintance with its academic siblings, physical anthropology and archaeology. Instead it has been drawn into the rapidly developing field—my colleagues in the humanities would say 'vortex'—of the social sciences.

We social anthropologists have not forgotten our scientific parentage, however, and we try to apply the general methods of scientific inquiry to the study of the customs and beliefs of the various peoples of the world. To do this we use the comparative method—that is, we try to study the variety of customs and beliefs as they occur in different societies, or at different times in the same society, all over the world. In doing this we hope to be able to reveal the rational basis to apparently bizarre beliefs and customs and to demonstrate the essential logical connexion between ostensibly unrelated aspects of these beliefs and customs.

If we are successful, then we should achieve an understanding of human behaviour which otherwise might not be possible. The first consequence of this is that it should enable us to appreciate more fully the customs of other peoples. The importance of this in a multi-racial society I need hardly emphasize. I would stress that it is necessary

for those dealing directly with people of a different cultural background not only to know that certain customs and beliefs *exist*, but also to be able to penetrate beneath those customs and to know how they are related to each other and to other aspects of social life. This social anthropology helps one to do.

But it also has another important function: social anthropology helps us to understand not only the customs and beliefs of strangers, but also those of our own society and so is able to give us greater insight into our own behaviour. Let me at this point make it clear that I do not advocate a course in social anthropology as a panacea for all our social problems. Given the wish and the desire to understand the behaviour of other people, whether of one's own cultural background or not, social anthropology can provide the means whereby insights can be obtained. It cannot by itself create the desire or the need: it can only provide the tools by means of which the task may be facilitated. Many people have successfully read a course of social anthropology and, alas, from the point of view of deepening their ability to understand human behaviour, like Omar Khayyam of old 'Evermore came out by the same door as in they went'.

III

But all social sciences study custom and belief in some form or another. Where does the specific contribution of social anthropology lie? Professor Monica Wilson of Cape Town expresses the essential point when she says that:

One of the major contributions of anthropology to social studies is, I think, the insistence on synthesis. One after another the field workers emphasize the interrelation of different aspects of society, insisting that economics is not to be understood apart from religion, or law apart from either of these; that the form

of kinship and local grouping, and the form of religious beliefs, are inextricably related (Wilson, 1948, p. 11).

This insistence on synthesis, however, has not always been a characteristic feature of social anthropology. Nineteenth-century anthropology was obsessed with the search for origins. The great anthropologists of the time were fascinated by the origin of man and his social institutions. They spent their time speculating about the origin, say, of marriage and the family, and about how these institutions, in their known forms, came into being. They studied these customs and institutions in different societies all over the world—but always in isolation from the total social context in which they appeared. Some sought the key in evolutionary hypotheses and others in the transmission of ideas from one society to another, but all were interested primarily in origins.

Customs and institutions in this sort of study were disparate phenomena; the classical anthropologists sought to equate a particular custom, say, amongst one people with a similar custom elsewhere. They were thus satisfied to build their theories and speculations on the chance observations of customs and beliefs made by travellers and other visitors to the various peoples of the world.

But with the rapid development of the subject during the latter half of the nineteenth century it soon became clear that the theories and speculations had outrun the facts needed to support them. More detailed information was called for. Anthropologists tried to fill their need initially by sending expeditions of subject-specialists to particularly interesting parts of the globe to collect accurate and detailed scientific information. Thus we find the famous Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898 and the Jessup Expedition to the North Pacific in 1897. But these were

only short visits and they soon gave way to prolonged personal study by individual research workers. One of the first of these was the study by Radcliffe-Brown of the Andaman Islanders in 1908 and 1909. But the pattern of modern anthropological study was set by Malinowski, who spent several years between 1914 and 1918 amongst the Trobriand Islanders in Melanesia. Unlike his predecessors, he worked through the language of the people and participated in their activities as much as he could.

When the anthropologist became acquainted with the peoples through personal experience, instead of through the reports of anthropologically untrained observers, a new emphasis came into the subject. This emphasis was the one to which Professor Wilson has referred: the interrelationships between the institutions of the society. The sort of community that Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski and several of their illustrious successors studied was the small island community and it was possible for the anthropologist to see the whole community in action. Hence they became impressed by the interdependence of the customs, beliefs, and behaviour. The late Robert Redfield has suggested that the period through which social anthropology has just passed could be characterized as the 'period of study of simple societies conceived as self-contained autonomous societies. The simplicity of such a society—which became a point in our methodological strength', he says, 'lies partly in the fact that one man can observe all of it or a fair sample of it, and partly in the congruence of all the major conceivable systems that make it a whole: the society, the culture, the community, the self-defining group with common and exclusive loyalties—these coincide with one another in the same real entity: those few people, right there' (Redfield, 1955, p. 25).

This approach led directly to the conception of society as an integrated whole. This point of view is the one expressed in a different context by John Donne three centuries ago when he said:

No man is an Iland, intire of itselfe: every man is a peece of the continent, a part of the maine; if a clod bee washed away by the sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a manner of thy friends or of thine owne were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind (Devotions XVII).

The form in which this is most developed in anthropology is in Radcliffe-Brown's idea of the social system which assumes that societies are in a state of homoeostasis or equilibrium and that 'Morals, law, etiquette, religion, government, and education are all parts of the complex mechanism by which a social structure exists and persists' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 195). Thus Evans-Pritchard is able to define the task of social anthropology as: 'to study the social institutions and interdependent parts of social systems'; and he goes on to state that: 'the use of the methods of the natural sciences implies that societies must be conceived as systems analogous to the systems postulated by these sciences and that the explanation of an institution or custom must be in terms of its function in the maintenance of the whole system of which it forms a part' (1948, pp. 9, 10).

Malinowski also propounded a similar point of view and suggested that a culture was an integrated whole, and he stressed that if any part of it was tampered with a general collapse might follow (Hogbin, 1957, p. 248).

This postulate has provided an enormous stimulus to the development of the subject because detailed systematic observation by well-trained scholars was needed in order

to be able to present the operation of the constituent institutions of a society as an ongoing social system. Fieldwork became the mark of professional status amongst anthropologists; and over the last twenty-five years we have seen the publication of a number of extremely detailed and penetrating studies of tribal communities, all of which have been based on personal observation and experience of the anthropologists.

Many of these studies have been made not on small isolated island communities, but in Africa, whose history has always been one of constant movement of peoples and the rise and fall of states. It is interesting to note, therefore, that at the very time when the postulates of the unity of cultures or the integration of social systems were providing the stimulus for detailed anthropological studies, fieldworkers were being forced to take into account the fact that the tribes they were studying could not be sealed off for study as self-contained systems of social relationships or as integrated cultural units. By the time these studies were made the tribes had themselves been drawn into social and cultural relationships both with other tribes and with Europeans, who had by then established effective administrative control over the tribes. In other words, the African peoples had become part of what Redfield called a 'compound society' (1955, p. 25), Radcliffe-Brown a 'composite society' (1952, p. 202), or Furnivall a 'plural society' (1948, pp. 303 ff.). Radcliffe-Brown defines a composite society as: 'A new political and economic structure in which the Europeans even though few in numbers, exercise a dominating influence.' He goes on to say that: 'Europeans constitute different classes within the new structure, with different languages, different customs and modes of life, and different sets of ideas and values' (1952, pp. 201-2).

The study of tribal communities in these changed circumstances provides a challenge to social anthropologists. Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown had conducted the field studies on which they built their reputations among small-scale island peoples who clearly exhibited the close interdependence of institutions which became in different ways the essential postulate of the theoretical approaches they advocated. Both, however, later recognized the problem of culture contact or social change. It is, nevertheless, significant that to the end Radcliffe-Brown remained interested mainly in the problems of 'integrated' societies and made little personal study of social change, and that the writings of Malinowski on the subject of culture contact are in no way as great a contribution to social anthropological thinking as his earlier writings on the Trobrianders.¹

The pupils of these two great teachers, however, were forced to face squarely the realities of the situations in which they found themselves—especially in Africa where most tribal communities had long been in contact with other tribes or with Arabs and had recently been drawn, as I have said, into the commercial net of the Western world. They came to realize that the study of tribal peoples in the modern administrative and social context was not only a valid field of anthropological inquiry: it was also a challenging one.²

Several anthropologists working in Africa have accepted this challenge. Many of those who have done so naturally approached this new field of study with the same basic set of postulates as they had tribal studies. They have attempted to see the operation of these 'plural' or 'composited' societies as social systems in which their parts were all interdependent. Thus one of the more sophisticated attempts at the analysis of social change in Africa (G. and M. Wilson,

1945) assumes a basic equilibrium in society in which the different parts of the social system are in harmony. Change in one part sets up radical oppositions, thus disturbing its equilibrium, which is bound to be restored by other changes which must sooner or later occur. Their assumption that a harmonious equilibrium is a permanent or 'normal' feature of social systems thus forces them to see conflict and radical opposition as temporary or 'abnormal' phenomena.

Hellmann, who has made the outstanding pioneering studies of Africans in urban societies, similarly assumes an inescapable connexion between the parts of a culture, as for example when she attacks the belief that 'culture can be divided into entirely separate departments, that this one can be changed or that one retained intact' as a 'denial of the interdependence of the institutions which form a culture and of the inevitable ramifications of the process of culture contact' (Hellmann, 1957, p. 9).

The postulate of the 'unity of culture' and the view of 'society as an integrated whole' is most severely put to test in the sort of social situation Hellmann is trying to handle. The new urban communities are one of the characteristic features of the 'plural' or 'composite' societies of Africa. To the anthropologist, accustomed to studying a small community of tribesmen going about their everyday affairs and meeting their crises in terms of well-defined and consistent sets of norms and expectations, the hurly-burly of urban life, with its polyglot population, its ceaseless comings and goings, its apparent crass materialism and contrasts between wealth and poverty, presents a welter of confusion which he finds difficult to appreciate except by contrasting it with the regularity, predictability, and stability of tribal life. Many of the earlier anthropologists, and certainly most of the administrators dealing with Africans in town,

indeed, could describe what they saw only in terms of 'detribalization', by which they meant at best a departure from tribal modes of behaviour, but more usually a state of personal disorganization—as if the urban African who eschewed tribal ways could find no other possible substitute in towns. To them the tribal way of life and the Western way were two mutually exclusive, polar opposite, categories.

IV

But the situation is not as straightforward as this. Perhaps I can make the point more clearly if I can describe to you an African who lives in one of the towns of the Federation. William, who is in the middle forties, is always neatly turned out in a spotless suit, well pressed and immaculately kept. In fact William is rather conscious of his clothes and once entered a competition for the best-dressed man in town. He would probably take a good deal more interest in ball-room dancing, the appeal of which lies considerably in being able to don the appropriate dress, were it not for the fact that his wife feels that it is below his dignity for a man in his position to associate with the sort of people who frequent the dance halls. He is obviously prosperous and the furnishings of his house show it. Each of his bedrooms is fully furnished with dressing table and so on, and in his own he has a bedside radio. The living-room sports a lounge suite and radiogram. A glass-topped table in the middle of the room is covered by a neat table cloth, and on it is a vase of flowers. It is true that William goes to work on a bicycle, but there is a motor-car parked outside his house. Unfortunately it is defunct, but to possess even a defunct motor-car in an African township is a mark of sophistication.

William reached middle primary school successfully and by local standards is reasonably well educated. With his wife he is a regular churchgoer (he is an Anglican). Milk, bread, jam and butter, and many other types of European foodstuff appear regularly in his diet and he drinks bottled beer in preference to African beer. Unlike most of his fellows he eats his meals with knife and fork instead of with his fingers in the traditional way.

He has been away from his tribal area for nearly twenty-five years, and he has spent most of this time in the towns. For six years he lived in several of the larger towns in South Africa. He holds no land rights in his tribal area though he occasionally visits his kinsmen there. He says he is likely to remain in town for the rest of his days.

We have here, then, the picture of a typical urbanized or 'detrribalized' African—prosperous and living a civilized life, settled in town and never likely to leave it. But I have omitted to tell you his occupation: he is what Europeans would call a 'witchdoctor', but what I would rather call an *ng'anga*. He is a traditional type of tribal medical practitioner, sometimes using the bones or some other divining instrument to determine the causes of misfortune, but usually dispensing medicines. Some of these medicines probably have pharmacological properties, but mostly they appear to rest on magical principles for their efficacy. If you should visit his 'surgery' you will find a mummified pangolin hanging on the wall, while a bottle here contains the fat from the heart of a lion, in a jar there is powdered horn of the rhinoceros, in another bottle some pulverized roots; here lies a piece of resin, there a bunch of dried leaves. A ceremonial axe for cutting the herbs and a hoe for digging the roots hang on a peg.

While in his 'surgery' William does not wear the tradi-

tional fur cap of the *ng'anga*.³ Instead he wears a spotlessly clean white surgeon's coat. On the table is a filing cabinet and a set of 5 by 4 cards containing the case details of the people he has treated. A typewriter on the desk is used for his official correspondence—and he has a good deal of it because he holds office in an association of *ng'angas* which has been formed to protect their interests. Living in a commercial environment William adopts modern sales techniques to further his business. He has brochures printed which set out the history of some of his successful cases—cases which he states the European doctors have failed to cure.

Who are his patients? William argues that in some circumstances the White man's medicine is definitely best. When his own wife was confined, for example, she was attended by a European doctor. There are, however, other conditions, he claims, for which his medicine is superior. The trader who wishes to attract customers to his shop will find that William will be able to provide a charm that will do the trick. He also can help the scholar who wishes to get an easy examination paper, the workseeker who wants to soften the heart of his prospective employer, the ambitious clerk who wants to be promoted over the heads of his fellows, the flirt who wants to attract some other woman's husband, the wife in turn who wants to hold her husband, the jaded transport driver who wants to get the most out of a *mahobo* party—all will find that William has something for them.

Cynics may argue that William is a charlatan, a sophisticated detribalized African trading on the superstitions of his gullible fellows. I do not think that this is true. It is not that he is prepared to serve any concoction to his patients. He genuinely believes in his powers and goes to considerable trouble to find the correct ingredients for his potions,

making frequent trips to the reserves to find the right herbs. A study of the medicines he uses shows that, although they appear at first sight to be a hotch-potch of odd plants and roots, when the symbolism of each herb is known the mixture has its own logical make-up.

William and his patients are in fact the product of a composite society. Their behaviour is conditioned by two different if not opposed sets of beliefs. William's interest in dress and in displaying the accoutrements of Western civilization betrays his involvement in a system of prestige which can only be understood in terms of the relative positions of Europeans and Africans in this society.⁴ His wearing of the white coat and the case cards can only be understood in terms of the very high prestige that Western medicine has amongst the African population. Yet to some extent he is in competition with Western medicine—he publicizes his successes in cases where European doctors have failed. Western medicine is based on scientific principles empirically established, but William's wearing of his white coat does not imply that he subscribes to, or is even aware of, these principles; William's medicine is based on magic.

It is true that the tribal life into which William was born also rests on empirically established invariable relationships in so far as people know that seeds grow only if they are planted at the right season of the year, that certain food-stuffs only become edible if they are soaked in water, that the bark of a certain tree paralyses fish in pools, that certain stones heated with charcoal will yield metallic iron, and so on. But at the same time tribesmen explain some events in terms of the human control of the supposed inherent power of certain substances or procedures, that is, by magic. Scientific thought, on the other hand, which permeates the industrial civilization in which William lives, admits

of no causal relationships that cannot be experimentally demonstrated. William, however, is able to live in a Western industrialized community of this sort and still retain his belief in the efficacy of magic: he is not aware that his own beliefs are incompatible with the beliefs which provide the foundation for the society in which he lives.

Many of William's patients are involved in similar inconsistencies, they desire advancement or satisfactions in terms of a set of values consonant with an industrial society but seek these satisfactions through the practice of magic. The *ng'angas* erect an association on patently Western lines with a chairman, secretary-treasurer, minutes, meetings, and all the paraphernalia of modern impersonal bureaucracy in order to prosecute their interests in practising an art which has its roots in the intimate relationships of a face-to-face tribal community and which is in blatant contradiction to the science-dominated way of life of the towns in which they operate.

We are presented here with a situation in which people operate simultaneously with sets of norms derived from two opposed parts of a 'plural' or 'composite' society. Yet the two sets of beliefs apparently do not conflict. Clearly we are not dealing with an integrated cultural system but with one in which quite disparate systems of beliefs may co-exist and be called into action in different social situations. This seems to call for concepts which do not assume the harmony and integration of parts of a social system. We need to examine closely the exact degree of interdependence of institutions—indeed, to find out whether there is any interdependence. We need to trace meticulously the 'inevitable ramifications of the process of culture contact', for it is obvious here that change has not penetrated equally to all sectors of culture and belief and the

making frequent trips to the reserves to find the right herbs. A study of the medicines he uses shows that, although they appear at first sight to be a hotch-potch of odd plants and roots, when the symbolism of each herb is known the mixture has its own logical make-up.

William and his patients are in fact the product of a composite society. Their behaviour is conditioned by two different if not opposed sets of beliefs. William's interest in dress and in displaying the accoutrements of Western civilization betrays his involvement in a system of prestige which can only be understood in terms of the relative positions of Europeans and Africans in this society.⁴ His wearing of the white coat and the case cards can only be understood in terms of the very high prestige that Western medicine has amongst the African population. Yet to some extent he is in competition with Western medicine—he publicizes his successes in cases where European doctors have failed. Western medicine is based on scientific principles empirically established, but William's wearing of his white coat does not imply that he subscribes to, or is even aware of, these principles; William's medicine is based on magic.

It is true that the tribal life into which William was born also rests on empirically established invariable relationships in so far as people know that seeds grow only if they are planted at the right season of the year, that certain food-stuffs only become edible if they are soaked in water, that the bark of a certain tree paralyses fish in pools, that certain stones heated with charcoal will yield metallic iron, and so on. But at the same time tribesmen explain some events in terms of the human control of the supposed inherent power of certain substances or procedures, that is, by magic. Scientific thought, on the other hand, which permeates the industrial civilization in which William lives, admits

of no causal relationships that cannot be experimentally demonstrated. William, however, is able to live in a Western industrialized community of this sort and still retain his belief in the efficacy of magic: he is not aware that his own beliefs are incompatible with the beliefs which provide the foundation for the society in which he lives.

Many of William's patients are involved in similar inconsistencies, they desire advancement or satisfactions in terms of a set of values consonant with an industrial society but seek these satisfactions through the practice of magic. The *ng'angas* erect an association on patently Western lines with a chairman, secretary-treasurer, minutes, meetings, and all the paraphernalia of modern impersonal bureaucracy in order to prosecute their interests in practising an art which has its roots in the intimate relationships of a face-to-face tribal community and which is in blatant contradiction to the science-dominated way of life of the towns in which they operate.

We are presented here with a situation in which people operate simultaneously with sets of norms derived from two opposed parts of a 'plural' or 'composite' society. Yet the two sets of beliefs apparently do not conflict. Clearly we are not dealing with an integrated cultural system but with one in which quite disparate systems of beliefs may co-exist and be called into action in different social situations. This seems to call for concepts which do not assume the harmony and integration of parts of a social system. We need to examine closely the exact degree of interdependence of institutions—indeed, to find out whether there is any interdependence. We need to trace meticulously the 'inevitable ramifications of the process of culture contact', for it is obvious here that change has not penetrated equally to all sectors of culture and belief and the

adoption of a new set of customs and beliefs in one context does not necessarily imply a corresponding modification of custom and beliefs in another. A change in one aspect of the social system may alter one institution completely, modify yet another, and leave a third relatively unaffected.⁵

V

This appears to be a nice theoretical point with very little practical import. But the postulate of integrated systems may appear in the guise of two mutually incompatible and opposed ways of life, the tribal and the Western, and this can easily lead to miscalculations in the field of human relationships. I think I can illustrate what I mean by this from the history of the tribal elders on the Copperbelt of Northern Rhodesia.

When the copper-mines were founded about thirty years ago the mine managements found themselves with an African labour force of several thousands drawn from a wide range of tribes both in Northern Rhodesia and its immediate neighbours. The managements were forced to communicate with, and to receive communications from, this labour force through the mine policemen, who were paid employees of the management. This was soon seen to be unsatisfactory and the managements cast around for some means of establishing contact directly with their African employees. It was natural that they should have chosen to use the outstanding feature of the labour force: that each man was a member of a tribe and that a limited number of tribal groups would embrace the great majority of the African employees on the mines. Accordingly each of the larger groups of tribesmen was asked to elect one of their members to be a tribal elder. This elder would then be able to represent his fellow tribesmen to the management

and to convey the information and instructions from the management back to the employees.

We are told that this suggestion was greeted with acclamation when it was first suggested and it seemed to be an admirable solution. The tribal elders were appointed and these formed a committee which regularly met with the compound manager and were able to raise complaints and put points of view to the management. At the same time the compound manager was able to make announcements of management policy directly to the employees through these representatives. The tribal elders soon took on several other unofficial duties. They began to settle the many minor domestic disputes which previously had gone to the compound manager or had been left to heal by themselves. They were also the official representatives of the chiefs in the towns and the persons to whom tribesmen could go when they first came to town or needed some other tribal contact.

This was in 1931. Frequently the inconsistencies and conflicts in social relationships lie dormant until they are exposed in critical events or stress situations. A situation of this sort arose in 1935 when there were riots following an abrupt announcement of an increase in taxation. The troubles, oddly enough, were most severe in Luanshya, where the tribal-elder system had first been started. One might have thought that it would be most securely established there. We are told that the compound manager had taken the precaution of consulting his tribal elders and had been assured by them that there would be no trouble there. Later, however, when he was having a bath one of his clerks came running to tell him that the Bemba tribal elder, one of the most important on the mine, had been chased away from a meeting of mine workers who had

accused him of being in league with the Europeans. When the actual violence broke out some of the tribal elders took shelter with the Europeans in the mine compound offices.

After these disturbances the tribal-elder system was reinstated and seemed to work perfectly well again until in 1940 when another stress situation arose. During riots at Mufulira the tribal elders were again rejected by the mine employees and a committee of seventeen was elected to serve as leaders of the strike. We do not know who these men were, but it is clear that they did not draw on their tribal standing to attain this position of leadership: they were essentially industrial employees. The management seemed to be aware that the tribal-elder system was not quite meeting the needs they had hoped it would, but were apparently unable to see that its failure sprang from the assumption that Africans working on the copper-mines were fundamentally tribesmen and could best be represented in industrial matters by tribal representatives. Accordingly the system was overhauled and reconstituted and in this form became incorporated into the governmental structure of Northern Rhodesia through the Urban Advisory Councils.⁶

The tribal representatives, as the tribal elders were now called, seem to have operated satisfactorily until a third and final stress situation arose in 1953. In 1948 the African Mine Workers Union had been established and for a while the tribal representatives and the African Mine Workers Union provided alternative channels of negotiation with the managements. Eventually in 1952 the managements decided to issue gowns to the tribal representatives, presumably as a device to bolster up their prestige. This set in train a series of incidents which culminated in an agitation by the Union to abolish the tribal representatives as a part

of the official administrative system of management. The management were prepared to do this if the general run of votes was in favour of it. In fact 96.9 per cent. of the votes cast were for the abolishment of the tribal representatives (Epstein, 1958, p. 100).

The striking fact emerges that on three separate occasions in the last twenty-five years the African mine workers on the Copperbelt have publicly repudiated the leadership of their own elected tribal representatives. The simplest explanation of this is that these are 'detrribalized' people, they are industrial workers living within a Western civilized community who have put their tribal ways behind them. Yet the struggle for power within the same trade union which initiated the agitation to abolish tribal representatives was cast in tribal terms, the rank and file saw it as a struggle for power between Bemba and Nyanja interests. The formation of the African Staff Association on the mines was also seen as a split between the Bemba-led mine-workers' union and the Lozi-led staff association. When Shona are ranged against Sena in boxing matches in the African township of Harare in Salisbury, when tribal fights break out in the single quarters on the mines, when men choose wives from their own tribes rather than from others, it is difficult to argue that we are dealing with detrribalized people. Nor can we argue this when members of local government councils express their personal hostilities in tribal terms. The tribal representative of the Ngoni people of the Fort Jameson area of Northern Rhodesia in meetings, for example, used to address the Bemba representative as Chitimukulu, that is, with the title of the Bemba paramount chief. In doing so he made frequent references to him as his slave. To call a man a slave is normally the surest way of starting a fight, but the Bemba representative replied in

like coin calling the Ngora representative by his paramount's title, Mpezem, and also calling him a slave. Neither took umbrage at this. Each was a representative of a tribe which before the British occupation was at war with the other and each dissipated the hostility he was constrained to feel as a representative of his tribe by joking with his adversary.

Here, then, is another apparent contradiction: sometimes the African mine workers co-operated as tribesmen but at others they appeared to repudiate their tribal affiliations.

All those who are called upon to handle human beings, not as individuals but as members of groups, must operate with some conception of how a social system works. It is only on the basis of some sort of working model of society that administrators or managers or politicians—I might even say statesmen—can predict probable behaviour in consequence of given actions. Those responsible for determining administrative policy on the mines appear to have been working with too simple a model. They seemed to assume that the tribal way of life was a tightly coherent set of values, beliefs, and customs, and that a person who behaved in one situation as a tribesman was bound to do so in all situations even when he was living in a modern industrial community. But it seems abundantly clear from the evidence we have that tribal norms and values only operate when tribesmen interact as *tribesmen*. As industrial workers they sometimes unite and co-operate in terms of their common interests in opposition to their employers, but arm themselves when they are not involved in relationships with the employer; they see each other primarily as tribesmen.

Tribalism in this sense is still an active force organizing personal relationships in industrial towns, is not only pro-

vides the set of norms and values in terms of which African townsmen may organize their personal relationships, but also a label by means of which people from different tribal groups may fix their behaviour towards one another. The appropriate norms and values operate according to the situation in which the person finds himself. In the wider society it is 'colour' which determines relationships with Europeans; in the anonymous society of the African township it is his tribe or his social class; and amongst his intimates it is a variety of personal ties of which kinship is the most important. The apparently opposed ways of life designated by 'tribalism' or 'westernism' co-exist in the same society. The presence of the one does not imply the absence of the other, for they operate in different situations.

VI

This incorporation of apparently conflicting values into a single social field brings us back to the question of the 'plural society', for as we have seen it comes into being though encompassing in its structure 'different customs and modes of life, and different sets of ideas and values'. The sort of contradictions and conflicts of values, norms, and beliefs we have been describing have arisen in this way in Central Africa.

The term 'plural society' itself is a contradiction since the idea of 'society' in terms of the usual sociological definition implies 'unity'—the antithesis of plurality. The problem of plural societies, then, lies in this contradiction—in what way can these societies be both 'plural' and 'societies'—indeed, if they are 'plural' can they be 'societies'?

Furnivall who first introduced the term seems to find three outstanding characteristics of plural societies. Firstly,

as he puts it, 'there is a medley of peoples'. 'Each group', he says, 'holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways.' This is also the point which Radcliffe-Brown picks out as the main characteristic of what he calls 'composite societies', as does Redfield, who refers to 'heteronomous societies'. A second characteristic which Furnivall seems to isolate is that in the plural society the different sections of the community live side by side, but separately, in the same political unit. Here, then, is the 'plurality' and the 'society'. But the significant problem anthropologically is the effect each has on the other. Here Furnivall raises his third characteristic, on which he places considerable emphasis. He says that in plural societies the members of the different sections meet as individuals but only in the market-place in buying and selling. He argues that the peoples comprising a plural society are broken up into groupings of isolated individuals. The consequence of this is that these individuals show a lack of agreement about common action, or as he puts it, 'a disintegration of social will'. This disintegration of 'social will', he argues, is reflected in a corresponding disorganization of 'social demand', by which he means that moral and ethical considerations play little part in the relationship between the individuals of the different ethnic groups. In sociological terms there are no commonly accepted norms and values in terms of which members of different ethnic groups may interact.

Sociologically these three characteristics are related. The social distance between the different ethnic groups is related to their differences in custom, language, religion, moral codes, and so on, and it is a fairly well-established sociological principle that relationships across social distances become categorized. In other words, in situations where

groups are socially separated, an individual of one group is treated primarily as a representative of the other group and seldom in any other capacity (Mitchell, 1956). Presumably this is what Furnivall takes to be 'atomization'.

The sort of data I have been presenting this evening suggests that Furnivall's formulation of the problem is possibly incomplete and the weakness seems to lie in the assumption that categorical relationships imply 'individualization'. The evidence we have is that even in the situations where we could expect most of what Furnivall calls 'atomization'—in the industrial towns—the African population is linked and cross-linked by ties of many sorts. Their bonds with their own tribesmen are counterbalanced by innumerable ties which they create with other tribesfolk through common membership in church congregations, through sharing a common position on a scale of social prestige, through having been classmates at the same school, through belonging to the same cultural associations, through taking part in the same political movements, through playing games with one another, through marriage, through neighbourliness, through working together in the same factory or gang, and perhaps most important of all through being all of one race in a society where racial cleavages are paramount. Categorization implies anonymity and categorical relationships between tribes gives a false semblance of tribalism amongst Africans in towns. As the various cross-cutting ties of the sort I have mentioned come into being so the anonymity disappears. The sort of close, intense, personal social relationships characteristic of tribal communities may not exist in industrial towns but other and different sorts of relationships ensure that there is no social 'atomization'. Furnivall's picture, then, of plural societies essentially as collectivities of foreign people acting towards each other

as depersonalized 'economic men' gives way to one in which people stand opposed to one another in one situation and in so doing operate in terms of a common set of norms and values, and stand divided in another, separated by different customs and beliefs.

Gluckman makes these cross-cutting ties the central theme of his analysis of the modern situation in Zululand (Gluckman, 1958, 1955). We might call the concept underlying his analysis the 'theory of counterbalancing cleavages'. In considering the feud, the dictionary definition of which he says is a 'lasting state of hostility', he writes:

There is no society which does not contain such states of hostility between its component sections; but provided they are redressed by other loyalties they may contribute to the peace of the whole. . . . I am not suggesting that divided loyalties and interests will always prevent a dispute arising or prevent social dislocation and change. Loyalties and interests are not thus beautifully balanced. What I am saying is that these conflicting loyalties and divisions of allegiance tend to inhibit the development of open quarrelling and that the greater the division in one area of society the greater is likely to be the cohesion in a wider range of relationships—provided that there is a general need for peace and the recognition of a moral order in which the peace can flourish. . . . The more a man's ties require that his opponents in one set of relations are his allies in another, the greater is likely to be the peace in the feud' (Gluckman, 1955, pp. 24-26).

From the sociological point of view, then, I would choose the relative lack of counterbalancing cleavages across the component ethnic groups as one of the significant features of the plural society. The cultural and ethnic differences are by themselves of no account. There are linguistic, religious, and social differences and divergences of custom

amongst the inhabitants of the United Kingdom, but this does not mean that the United Kingdom is a plural society. As Gluckman has pointed out, the significant groups in British political life are largely functional groups—trade unions, employers and trade associations, educational interests, religious sects, and the like. It is these which exert pressure on Parliament, but it is not interest groups which elect members to Parliament. He goes on:

We therefore get a high degree of national representation because most members of Parliament are elected by amorphous constituencies which contain many of these interest groups. The Member of Parliament is supposed to represent all his constituents, whatever their party affiliation, and this system of representation cuts clean across the important political pressure groups' (Gluckman, 1955, p. 25).

English society, therefore, in spite of incorporating groups with different values, is not a plural society. England at the time when Disraeli spoke of two nations probably was, but I am not sufficient of an historian to defend this point of view.⁷

Furnivall is interested in the political aspect of plural societies. He argues in effect that they have no 'social will' or consensus and that unless there is 'social will' no self-government is possible. Whether self-government is possible with or without 'social will' is a problem for the political scientist. The anthropologist following the line of thought I have developed would argue that, where there is no overall system of values and there are no counterbalancing cleavages, the hostilities within it must be suppressed by legislation or ultimately by force if the body politic is to be maintained intact. Hence constraint rather than consensus would seem to be the basis of cohesion in plural societies. In 'unitary' as opposed to 'plural' societies,

on the other hand, internal differences may periodically be submerged in the performance of common rituals. In this way, for example, the Earth Cult unites the clans which compose Tallensi society (Fortes, 1945). Although there is considerable social distance between Hindu castes, Indian society is not 'plural'. The castes themselves are part of a single religious system and their participation in common ritual is an essential way of holding the society together. No constraint is needed. The social system studied by Dr. Ioan Lewis (forthcoming) is another example of a society which has marked cleavages, but these are contained within a common value system—so much so that even in Somali towns the social interaction is in terms of the same sort of principles that operate in the rural areas.

We could perhaps visualize societies as complex reticulations of social relationships in which people are linked and cross-linked by numerous ties and bonds, some operating now to hold people together this way, and some operating now to hold the same people together in a different way. Societies conceived thus have no boundaries, for the network of relationships may ramify endlessly. The overall reticulation, however, is not uniformly distributed; here and there we may discern areas of relatively dense networks—'plexuses' or 'clusters' of relationships—while in other areas few social bonds unite people. I am here looking at the bonds in social relationships as the strands in the network so that the interstices represent either indifference or opposition. These are as much social relationships as co-operation. Consensus exists only amongst those people who happen to be acting jointly in one particular situation, in other circumstances there may well be conflicting valuations and hence dissent amongst the same people. Where there are sparse bonds there is naturally a lack of consensus and con-

sequently indifference or possibly dissent. Sparse bonds, therefore, imply that there are relatively few situations in which members of all the component clusters feel themselves obliged to act in concert.

Some conception such as this is essential if we are to study wide-scale societies such as those in Europe, since here the total pattern, and the consensus related to it, are difficult to perceive, and in fact may not exist at all. As Redfield points out: 'The autonomous and perfectly congruent society and culture has been pulled apart and scattered abroad. . . . The conception of an integrated social system gives way to the conception of a cluster of related but partly independent fields of activity.' Thus Barnes (1954, p. 42), in describing the life of inhabitants of a Norwegian parish, separates out their activities and relationships into three such relatively independent fields:

- (a) the territorially defined field in which the local government operates;
- (b) the fishing or industrial activities of men;
- (c) the network of personal relationships through friendship and kinship which spread out boundlessly from the individual.

This approach differs from that of those who postulate an integrated social system, for they see all relationships linked to one another in such a way that actions in one part inevitably affect relations in another and that all actions contribute to the operation of the whole. The society here is held together by a common value system and consensus is its characteristic feature. Here, as Dahrendorf (1958) has pointed out, conflict and opposition tend to be considered abnormal and pathological. Rex (1959, p. 124) has suggested that an analysis of Western European societies would be enriched by studies which started by assuming conflicting

valuations rather than some sort of social consensus. The study of plural societies is important for sociology generally, he argues, because the explicit recognition that they are *plural* societies draws attention to the fact that social systems do exist in which conflict is more obvious than consensus. Interestingly enough Professor Colson (1953) and Dr. van Velsen (forthcoming) have both found it profitable to approach the study of two stateless societies in Central Africa from this point of view, and their findings may in fact provide us with a lead to the fuller understanding of urban social systems.

At our present stage of thinking it appears that the concept of the social field is the most useful tool we have with which to analyse social systems. The social field embraces the range of social relationships within which the effects of actions in one part are likely to spread. Within the field there are likely to be clusters of highly interconnected social relationships in which actions in one part have a direct and immediate effect on other parts, while other parts of the field will be relatively unaffected by or isolated from these actions. Thus Epstein points out that it is possible that an African trade-union leader may order his domestic life in accordance with traditional and customary values without any obvious ambiguity.

But it is conceivable [he writes] that if in the course of his Union duties it becomes necessary for him to entertain important delegates and other visitors at his home, a considerable reordering of his domestic life may be involved. In these circumstances a wife whom he had married many years ago in his rural home might prove an inadequate hostess and he would be led to take a younger and more sophisticated woman in her place (Epstein, 1958, p. 237).

The task before us in the study of social relationships in

plural societies—and in social relationships I include the norms, values, and beliefs that relate to them—appears to be to trace out and describe the tissue of bonds which form these ‘clusters’, or ‘sets’ as Epstein calls them, within the larger social field. In doing this we need to examine a little more critically the mechanism by means of which the so-called ‘feed-back’ takes place within the ‘clusters’ and to examine specifically in which ways they are influenced by social relationships and value systems external to them but which are still parts of the total social field.⁸

An analysis of apparently tribal modes of organization of behaviour in striking non-tribal circumstances has allowed us to examine some of the ways in which differently but partially related fields of activity fit into a total social field which embraces what we have loosely called a ‘plural society’.

We are only at the beginning of studies of this sort and they seem to me to be both theoretically interesting and practically important. Our theoretical orientation will help us and our students—and eventually we hope the general public—to understand more fully some of the puzzling aspects of the society in which we live. We in my Department at the College are admirably placed to contribute our part to this process and, given the resources and the goodwill of those amongst whom we live and work, my colleagues and I hope to add our pickle to the mickle of modern learning. And if we are successful we may also contribute to the future of this Central African society—not by helping to abolish conflict, for that my theoretical orientation tells me is too much to hope for; but at least by seeing that misunderstandings come up about the right things at the right times between the right people.

NOTES

1. I would like to suggest that all those who work with the postulate of integrated social systems find this theoretical framework a handicap in the analysis of social change. They either take no interest in the topic and concentrate their attention on these societies which approximate to their theoretical construct, or they find that they are forced to see disharmony and conflict as an abnormal state. On this point Dahrendorf (1958) has pointed out that Talcott Parson's chapter on 'Social Change' in *The Social System* is far less convincing than the rest of his book.

2. I do not imply, of course, that excellent work on social change has not been done in other areas. Some outstanding work has been done recently by anthropologists who worked initially on island communities. See, for example, Firth (1954) and Hogbin (1957).

3. I am told he wears his cap when he uses his divining instruments when clients consult him in his house outside 'surgery' hours. Under Southern Rhodesian law it is illegal for him to use divining instruments and he could hardly do so in his 'surgery'.

4. He has tea sent down to his rooms at ten in the morning and four in the afternoon. When it arrives he stops his consultation and takes time off to have a cup of tea. It was explained to me that it is only someone with the prestige of a European doctor who can stop to drink tea while his patients are waiting outside to see him!

5. Leach (1954), using data from a society in Malaya composed of different 'tribal' elements, has also questioned the validity of the 'integrated society' postulate.

6. Tribal representatives were nominated as members of the first Urban Advisory Councils and these councils later became the lowest electoral colleges in towns through which African representatives to the Legislative Council were elected.

7. Frankenberg (1957) has made an illuminating study of a Welsh village, using this framework of analysis.

8. A step in this direction has been taken recently by Bott (1957), who has been able to show that while people who have dispersed social relationships must select from their personal experiences and systematize norms from them, which they then attribute to the segment of the society in which they are involved, those people who live in closely connected frameworks have their norms corrected and adjusted for them through gossip and discussion. In other words, the mechanism of feed-back is through the network of social relationships where these are interconnected.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARNES, J. A. (1954). 'Class and Committee in a Norwegian Island Parish', *Human Relations*, vii. 39-58.
- BOTT, E. (1957). *Family and Social Network*, London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.
- COLSON, E. (1953). 'Social Control and Vengeance in Plateau Tonga Society', *Africa*, xxiii. 3.
- DAHRENDORF, R. (1958). 'Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis', *American Journal of Sociology*, lxiv. 2: 115-27.
- EPSTEIN, A. L. (1958). *Politics in an Urban African Community*, Manchester: Manchester University Press for Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.
- EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E. (1948). *Social Anthropology: An Inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 4th February 1948*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- FIRTH, R. (1954). 'Social Organization and Social Change', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, lxxxiv. 1-20.
- FORTES, M. (1945). *The Dynamics of Clanship amongst the Tallensi*, London: Oxford University Press for International African Institute.
- FRANKENBERG, R. (1957). *Village on the Border*, London: Cohen and West.
- FURNIVALL, J. S. (1948). *Colonial Policy and Practice: A comparative study of Burma and Netherlands India*, Cambridge.
- GLUCKMAN, M. (1955). *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- (1958). *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand*, Rhodes-Livingstone Paper No. 28. Manchester: Manchester University Press for Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.
- HOGBIN, I. (1957). *Social Change*, London: Watts.
- LEACH, E. R. (1954). *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, London: G. Bell & Sons.
- LEWIS, I. M. (forthcoming). *A Pastoral Democracy*.
- MITCHELL, J. C. (1956). *The Kalela Dance*, Rhodes-Livingstone Paper No. 27. Manchester: Manchester University Press for Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.

- RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R. (1952). *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, London: Cohen and West.
- REDFIELD, R. (1955). 'Societies and Cultures as Natural Systems', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, LXXXV. 20-32.
- REX, J. (1959). 'The Plural Society in Sociological Theory', *British Journal of Sociology*, x. 2: 114-24.
- VAN VELSEN, J. (forthcoming). *The Politics of Kinship*.
- WILSON, G. and M. (1945). *The Analysis of Social Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WILSON, M. (1948). *Some Possibilities and Limitations of Anthropological Research: Inaugural Lecture delivered at Rhodes-University College: Grahamstown.*



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs
<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/>