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INDIGENOUS FORMS OF GOVERNMENT AMONG THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES¹

By government I mean the ways in which a group or association of people runs its affairs. The unit concerned may be as small as a band of Bushmen or as extensive as a cartel of manufacturers, but, whatever its scale, it faces two main tasks: the effective ordering of its internal activities and the maintenance of its interests *vis à vis* other units. That is to say, the government of almost any group involves administrative problems, those connected with the attribution of authority and the efficient implementation of policy decisions, and political problems, those concerned with the exercise of power and with competition for the control of peoples' actions.²

Such a distinction between the administrative or "internal" aspects of the government of a group and its political or "external" aspects is of course largely one of analytical convenience. Few groups or associations are purely monolithic in structure and, once a social group includes constituent sub-groups, political pressures inevitably develop among subordinate units of more or less equal status, while at the same time the sub-groups may function as elements in an over-all administrative hierarchy that emerges concomitantly. Thus, a unilineal descent group such as a clan which engages as an entity in political contests (for instance, in warfare or in competitive exchanges of valuables) with other clans of the same order may be internally organized in a simple set of age-grades, or it may contain an elaborate hierarchy of sub-clans, lineages, extended families and nuclear families. In both kinds of clans there exists a frame-work for administrative decision-making and action.

A further point to consider is that there may be differences in degree from one native society to another in the relative commitments of

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 15th Congress of the Société Jean Bodin in 1961. The theme of the Congress was "Gouvernés et gouvernants".

² See Smith (1956) for an elaboration of this kind of view.

structurally independent groups in administrative and political action. Thus, in some societies the extended family, the village, or the clan is primarily concerned in the organization of activities to exploit its own economic resources or its spiritual heritage, whereas in other societies, such as those where population pressures are great, the analogous units may have to devote considerably more time and energy to political activity aimed at protecting or adding to scarce resources. Similarly, there are differences in the total scale and elaboration of government among different native societies. This point need not be laboured; it is sufficient simply to compare, say, the pre-European government of the West African kingdom of Dahomey with that of the Konkomba tribe nearby, or the polity of the Hawaiian chiefdoms with those of other Polynesian societies such as Tikopia or Tokelau. Obviously, other comparisons of this kind could be made among the non-industrial peoples of the world, but this paper is not the place for them. Instead, I refer readers to such anthropological compilations as those edited by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) and by Middleton and Tait (1958).

My task here is to characterize briefly the forms of government traditionally found among the Aborigines of Australia, to discover on what bases these people managed their affairs. But first it will be necessary to sketch broadly the main features of aboriginal society and culture because, without this background, any discussion of particular aspects of Aboriginal political or administrative action would, I think, remain largely unintelligible.³

Continental Australia, which extends from about 10 degrees to 40 degrees south of the Equator, is almost 3,000,000 square miles in area. Naturally enough, an island of this size displays a great range of climatic, edaphic and topographical conditions. Thus, in the south-east the highest mountains are virtually treeless and are snow-covered for several months of the year, whereas those in the north-east are clad in dense jungles and rain-forests which harbour a variety of wild life. Again, to the east of the Great Dividing Range lie coastal plains that are exceedingly fertile and are watered by many substantial rivers; west of the range there is only one river system, the Murray-Darling, of any real consequence. Desiccated deserts, which cover hundreds of thousands of square miles of western and central Australia, meet on

³ The best introduction to the Australian Aborigines remains Elkin (1954), especially concerning social organization and religion. Also valuable, particularly for the treatment of economy and technology, is McCarthy (1957).

their east lightly timbered, rolling plains of brown and black soil; in the north they merge with unproductive savannahs that are baked dry for more than half the year, then flooded by monsoonal rains for the rest. More evidence of the environmental heterogeneity that exists in Australia could be adduced, but enough has been said here to set the scene.⁴

It has been estimated that, when Europeans first settled in Australia late in the eighteenth century, between 250,000 and 500,000 Aborigines were already in occupation — the most likely figure being about 300,000. These people were spread thinly and irregularly over the whole of the continent. Indeed, the only areas that they did not exploit to any extent were the bleak Alpine crests of the south-east and some completely waterless tracts of desert in the interior. Tribes thus sought a living in a variety of environments and, in consequence, there developed among them a limited range of technological and economic adaptations.

The major categories of environment, with associated technologies, that can be distinguished are the coastal, riverine, tropical forest, plains/savannah and desert. I shall indicate briefly the salient features of each, then go on to summarize the general pattern of Aboriginal economy and technology.⁵

Whether we consider the coastal tribes of the tropical north or those of the temperate south-east, we find they had certain important characteristics in common; ⁶ in particular their local territories were relatively shallow and the occupants spent little time in seeking the game and vegetable foods of the hinterland. Instead, with the aid of canoes and a wide repertoire of fishing techniques, they successfully exploited the estuaries and ocean reefs, not only for fish but also, in the north, for large crocodiles, dugong and turtles. In the south, stranded dolphins and small whales were occasionally taken for food. There were several significant consequences of the presence of such a reliable and abundant supply of food, some of which the people exchanged with inland tribes for other commodities, including bush foods. In general the coastal tribes were more sedentary than most and their population densities

⁴ See, for instance, Keast *et alia* (1959).

⁵ I shall not treat here the indigenous inhabitants of either Tasmania or of the Torres Straits islands, because almost nothing is known of the former and the culture of the latter has been greatly affected by Papuan influences.

⁶ Throughout this paper I use the past tense when referring to features of indigenous Aboriginal culture; this is because no tribes still exist with their cultures completely unaffected by European contact. Most in fact are radically altered (and are still changing); others are simply extinct.

were high by Australian standards. Thus, Rose (1960) records a density of about one person per three square miles for Groote Eylandt natives, whereas Thomson's figures (1934a) for some other fishing tribes living along the Gulf of Carpentaria indicate a density of almost two people per square mile. Similarly, observations by early settlers in the region of Sydney suggest that anything from 1,500 to 3,000 Aborigines inhabited the narrow coastal strip of 400 to 500 square miles between Botany Bay and Broken Bay.⁷

The main feature that distinguished the specifically riverine tribes from those of the coast was the greater emphasis that the former placed on hunting. Wild fowl and marsupials of many kinds frequented the river valleys and, taken together with the fish, eels and shellfish that abounded in the larger streams, provided a substantial and relatively stable supply of food all year round. Such tribes, or their constituent groups, seem to have been fairly sharply localized and to some extent sedentary. Population densities were probably somewhat lower than those of the coastal groups. Thus, the Murinbata of the Daly River in the Northern Territory, who numbered about 150, occupied something like 500 to 700 square miles, according to Stanner (1936). Elkin (1932) estimated that at least 10,000 natives lived on about 65,000 square miles in the fairly well watered Kimberley District of north-western Australia. In the mountainous river system of northern Victoria, a region of some 9,000 square miles supported more than 1,000 Aborigines who, says Baylie (1843), were divided into about a dozen local groups.⁸

Also in parts of tropical Australia there were Aborigines whose way of life fell somewhere between that of the truly coastal and that of the truly riverine tribes, in that for part of the year they lived on the seashores and fished, while for the rest they kept near the rivers and there hunted and fished. Naturally such people were less sedentary than those already discussed but, despite this, the productivity of their environment and the efficiency of their technology enabled them to maintain relatively high population densities. In north-eastern Arnhem Land the density as estimated by Warner (1937) was of the order of one person per eight or nine square miles, whereas Melville and Bathurst Island with a total area of about 3,000 square miles sustained

⁷ See Sadleir (1883) and Flanagan (1888), and also Thomson (1933, 1934b, 1935), McCarthy and McArthur (1960), and Worsley (1961).

⁸ See also Howitt (1880, 1904), Beveridge (1883) and Roth (1897, 1901).

in the 1920's a population of 1,000 — and Hart and Pilling (1960) believe that there were more inhabitants in the nineteenth century.⁹

From the hunting and fishing economies of the riverine and estuarine peoples we may turn to the primarily hunting and gathering economy of the dwellers in the jungles and rain-forests of north-eastern Australia. Little need be said of these Aborigines, whose specialized environment covered no great area. In the dense forests the larger game, although limited in variety, was easily taken and a wide range of vergetable products was collected. Food was therefore rarely short and the natives appear to have been nomadic only within relatively narrow limits. Lumholtz (1889), for instance, estimates that in the region of the upper Herbert River in northern Queensland the typical tribe of 200 to 250 members exploited a tract no greater than about 1,200 square miles.¹⁰

In marked contrast to the environmental conditions already discussed are those which confronted the desert tribes of the inland. In these regions, where the annual rainfall rarely exceeded ten inches, surface waters were few and unreliable. Although most men were skilled hunters, the seasonal movements of game were often so unpredictable and their numbers so few that meat comprised only a small fraction of the daily diet. The main source of food was the women's laborious gathering of seeds, roots and fruits. It is not surprising, then, that these people were highly nomadic within tribal territories of enormous size. The Aranda of Central Australia, for instance, who numbered at most 2,000 in the nineteenth century, occupied about 25,000 square miles (Spencer and Gillen 1927, Strehlow 1947). The 1,000 or so Walbiri to their north-west ranged over an even larger domain — one of at least 35,000 square miles (Meggitt 1962).¹¹

Finally, there should be mention of the many Aboriginal tribes which, as dwellers on the inland plains and savannahs, did not fit into any of the categories so far examined. In general they exploited areas that, although obviously more fruitful than the desert regions, were considerably less productive than the coastal and riverine localities. Their economies were based mainly on hunting and gathering, and fishing in small streams was occasional and incidental. By and large

⁹ See also Thomson (1948, 1949), Goodale (1957), McCarthy and McArthur (1960), and Meggitt (1963).

¹⁰ See also Roth (1901) and Tindale and Birdsell (1941).

¹¹ See also Cleland and Johnston (1933), Berndt (1945, 1959), Sweeney (1947) and Meggitt (1963).

the plains people were moderately mobile inside the defined boundaries of tribal territories of some size, and their population densities, as we might expect, appear to have fallen between those of the coastal and sylvan groups and those of the desert tribes: Unfortunately, there exists little detailed demographic information about these peoples.¹²

When we take a broad view of the various technologies and economies of the inhabitants of the several ecologically differentiated regions, however, we can perceive, underlying all these local variations, a basic and generalized way of life which we can refer to simply as Australian Aboriginal culture. Thus, we observe that everywhere the people obtained their livelihood by hunting, fishing, or gathering, or by some combination of these directly exploitative techniques; nowhere did the Aborigines engage in horticulture, even of the most rudimentary kind, nor was there any efficient domestication of indigenous animals. Compatible with this reliance on simple and immediate utilization of natural species was the infrequency of large scale, higher order processing of commodities and of any really important regional specialization. This in turn helped to account for the relatively low incidence of purely economic barter or trade. Even ritual gift-making and ceremonial exchanges were by no means prominent in Aboriginal social life, certainly not as significant as they were, and are still, in Melanesia.¹³

It is probably true that the need for freedom of movement to pursue game and to search for vegetable foods over wide areas also facilitated the undervaluing of material possessions, apart from the portable minimum necessary to achieve reasonable efficiency and tolerable comfort. Despite differences in the degree of mobility that various local groups exhibited according to the ecological region they inhabited, nowhere were there any completely sedentary peoples. The combination of economic parasitism on the environment and group mobility was reflected in the population densities which, as we have seen, ranged from as little as one person per thirty or forty square miles up to, perhaps, three per square mile. Even the highest figure recorded falls short of the minimal densities found among native horticulturalists in most parts of the Pacific basin. Such sparseness and mobility of population were obviously significant determinants of the form that Aboriginal government took.

But, whatever the Aborigines may have lacked in technological sophistication in exploiting the environment, however materially para-

¹² See also Mathew (1889), Roth (1897) and Howitt (1904).

¹³ See also McCarthy (1939-40, 1957).

sitic they may have been in their economy, this was balanced by the complexity of their religious ideas and the elaboration of their ritual activities, which the people themselves regarded as intrinsically significant techniques for ensuring productivity of man and nature. These stemmed from, and were important features of, the pan-Australian totemic philosophy — the view of the universe that regarded man, society and nature as interlocking and interacting elements in a larger, functionally integrated totality. According to Aboriginal belief, each variable in the system had an eternal, moral commitment to maintain itself unchanged for the benefit of the others and to contribute to the proper functioning of the system as a whole. As the mythical ancestors and culture heroes of the long past Dreamtime had defined the characteristics of the totality once and for all when they had participated in its creation and shaping, any subsequent change in any variable would inevitably affect the whole — and that for the worse. Thus it was the duty of every man to ensure, mainly by magico-religious means, that the *status quo* be preserved, an obligation that obviously ruled out most possibilities of cultural innovation, whether in the sphere of technology or of law.¹⁴

This kind of world-view emerged clearly in the Aborigines' attitudes to their homeland, be it the narrowly bounded habitation of a coastal fishing group or the vast domain of wandering desert dwellers. The territory was of course the main, if not the sole, source of food for the local unit. Even if, as was sometimes the case, the group hunted and foraged freely in the districts of similar neighbouring units, it had unequivocal title only to its own land, to the land with which it had spiritual bonds. That is to say, tribesmen did not acquire or inherit only the right to exploit the material resources of the tribal country; they also received the double privilege and obligation of maintaining the sacred tracks and sites of the ancestral and heroic beings who created the land and all its inhabitants.

Here maintenance did not mean mere protection from trespass or desecration but rather that certain groups, associations, or lodges of tribesmen were also expected to preserve and transmit unchanged the detailed myths and songs that recounted the exploits of the Dreamtime creatures and to perform regularly the quasi-historical and religious rituals that re-enacted the events of the Dreamtime. Similarly, these or other men of the tribe had to carry out the more obviously totemic

¹⁴ See Elkin (1954).

ceremonies that aimed at keeping up adequate supplies of natural species, at bringing the rain in season, and so on. Men believed that the very existence of this complex of myth, song and ritual was an assurance that nature as a whole, through the Dreamtime beings, would continue to play its part in the system — provided that men, individually and in social groups, also fulfilled their obligations to their local Dreamtime and totemic representatives. Failure of the living to act out the rituals and to transmit the myths would, it was feared, irrevocably upset the finely tuned system, with disastrous results for all. It is therefore as true to say that tribesmen were possessed by their land as it is to say that they possessed it; in effect they were no more than custodians of a tribal patrimony, holding it in trust from the Dreamtime for posterity.

No less intricate than the interrelation of the religious beliefs and actions of the Aborigines was the structure of their society. In almost every tribe there existed a striking range of social groups and categories, each one having some particular functions. We can in the first place distinguish broadly between groupings based primarily on considerations of locality and those defined mainly in terms of kinship and descent. This is by no means an absolute distinction; there was some degree of overlap or interaction between the categories, so that occasionally members of a given local group were recruited on the basis of kinship status, while some descent groups were localized. Nevertheless, it seems to me that, generally, considerations of kinship and descent *per se* were minimized in defining local groupings, whereas the fact of locality was in itself largely irrelevant in defining kin-groups.

At this juncture the main point to be made about local groups is that, although the "tribe" was ideally the maximal local unit, in fact the whole of its members rarely, if ever, assembled as a functioning entity. Instead, a tribe usually comprised a number of scattered local groups, among which the patrilineal, patrilocal horde was a rarity despite Radcliffe Brown's assertions (1930, 1951) that it was everywhere the fundamental basis of Australian social organization. Indeed the number, size, composition and interrelations of local sub-groups within a tribe varied with the ecological region, with the seasons, with current disputes and so on (Hiatt 1962a, Meggitt 1962). Moreover, although local communities possessed both governmental functions (those connected with the exercise of power and authority) and economic functions (those concerned with the exploitation of commodities) which in theory can be distinguished, in practice of course such a

division was neither simple nor clearcut. The same group might engage in both kinds of activities simultaneously.

Moreover, although Australian Aboriginal societies were demographically small-scale phenomena, they displayed a remarkable variety of social groupings and categories defined in terms of kinship and descent (Radcliffe Brown 1930, Elkin 1954). A tribe of no more than 1,200 members, for instance, could be so complexly organized as to include at the same time patrilineal moieties and patrilineal clans, matrilineal moieties and matrilineal clans, endogamous moieties of grouped generation levels, sub-sections and, for good measure, age-grades (Meggitt 1962). In addition, there were tribes with small patrilineal or matrilineal clans only, others with clans and phratries, some with moieties and clans, some that were simply cognatic or bilateral, and so on. When the distribution of these tribes is plotted on maps, it is clear that the several kinds of social groupings were not haphazardly interdigitated; their spread was not merely random. Rather, they tended to be assembled into large, continuous collocations which in some places merged. It is not possible, however, to correlate closely the arrangement of these clusters with that of the ecological regions; in fact there seems to have been no simple connection between the two. What is more likely is that the observed distributions reflected past history, that is, movements of groups of people and diffusions of cultural elements.

Whatever the specific kinds of kin- or descent-groups present in particular tribes, however, it was generally the case, except in some coastal areas in the south and south-east, that each tribe included in some manner both patrilineally and matrilineally organized groupings. Moreover, through a great part of Australia, there was a tendency for patrilineal categories to be concerned with highly ritualized cult activities involved in religious initiation and totemism, whereas matrilineal categories were likely to have to do with secular social events such as birth, betrothal and marriage, mourning and avenging deaths. Groupings such as sections and sub-sections which in a sense were at once patrilineally and matrilineally oriented were essentially ritual categories and not "marriage classes", as some anthropologists have mistakenly inferred.

Summarising the discussion so far, we find that the indigenous Aboriginal society possessed a number of distinguishing features: the tribal communities, although structurally complex, were egalitarian and of small size; their technologies, although ingenious, were limited in

scope and their economies were directly exploitative or parasitic on nature; their totemic philosophy and religion comprised an all-embracing monism, which rationalized a pervasive cultural conservatism. Given such socio-cultural attributes, we should not expect to find among the Aborigines any great elaboration of governmental forms.

In fact the nature of their government can be simply understood in terms of the differential interactions of the two basic variables of kinship and locality. Even at the highest structural level or at the widest geographical extent, it is easy to believe that here we are dealing with nothing more than domestic or quasi-domestic affairs.

Earlier writers (for instance, Spencer and Gillen 1899, 1904) occasionally referred to "nations" or "confederations" of tribes in Australia. Subsequent investigation, however, has revealed that these phenomena were in fact no more than aggregations of contiguous tribes which recognized that their languages and other social and cultural elements were in many respects similar.¹⁵ Thus the members of a Central Australian tribe might, indeed did, know that they shared with some of their neighbours certain principles of social grouping such as named subsections or certain religious beliefs and practices such as those concerning conception totemism. Although this acceptance of common likeness could facilitate friendly intercommunications (and this was not always the case),¹⁶ it did not mean that the members of the one tribe regarded themselves as being in any way administratively dependent on another, or that in any publicly accepted manner they were answerable for their actions to non-tribesmen. Whereas the members of a tribe might agree that certain kinds of behaviour (for instance, extratribal aggression or sacrilege) were likely to provoke the injured tribe to retaliate, they reserved the right to defend forcibly their own territories and persons from violation and attack by non-tribesmen.

Moreover, except in those areas, such as on the coast, where ecological factors permitted permanent concentrations of population, it was unlikely that a tribe as such often functioned effectively as a political and administrative unit clearly recognisable tribal leaders. As a rule the tribe as a whole simply comprised a number of loosely related, more or less localized groups of people who thought of them-

¹⁵ Roth's use (1897) of the term "mess-mates" to denote this kind of relationship is more apt.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Strehlow's account (1947) of the hostility that local divisions of the Aranda expressed towards one another.

selves as members of the tribe. The bases of their belief were the obvious facts that they spoke a common language and shared the one culture and that most of them were born within the bounds of the tribal territory. Although in terms of membership tribes were generally of small size, ranging from a few hundred to two or three thousand people, their territories in most parts of Australia were relative extensive and their patterns of subsistence promoted a wide dispersion of the smaller groups. These factors, plus the absence of writing, obviously militated against frequent intercommunication, whether direct or surrogate, among the totality of the tribespeople. Clearly, in the event of an emergency, it must have been exceedingly difficult for everyone in the tribal territory to have been informed of the new situation and summoned to meet in time to deal with it.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the main occasions on which most or all of the local groups within the tribe assembled (sometimes together with sections of neighbouring tribes) were those which concerned the annual performance of major religious ceremonies or the seasonal exploitation of certain regular occurrences such as the swarming of edible *bogong* moths in southern New South Wales or the bearing of *bunya* nut pines in south-eastern Queensland — that is to say, events for which the people could plan well in advance. Even so, it required only the onset of unseasonable flooding rains or of drought for the people to postpone or abandon their arrangements for large-scale gatherings. Thus, in the Central Australian desert, failure of the expected summer rains to fall might prevent widely separated local groups in a tribe from meeting for several years in succession.

In general then, the tribe constituted a congeries of more or less localized sub-groups of varying kinship composition, and (ignoring minor exceptions) these, and not the tribe itself, were the significant political and administrative units. Such a local community was usually the largest segment of the tribe that was a solidary group and not a mere category of persons, a unit whose personnel often acted together on particular occasions and whose resident members had something of a corporate title to the land they normally occupied. How often these politically equivalent communities within the tribe met together to participate in economic, ritual, or military activities was, as we have seen, to some extent a function of the productivity of the ecological region they inhabited. It seems unlikely, however, that food supplies were sufficient in many areas to support any long-term assembly of the whole tribe in a specific locality.

Full and effective membership of a local community, like full tribal membership, seems in most cases to have depended primarily on birth (or conception) in the appropriate territory, followed by some kind of continuing residential and spiritual association with the area. Apparently, residence in itself gave only economic and ritual privileges (rather than rights) to immigrants, including spouses of existing members. These people were free to share in the available food and to participate in many ceremonies, but they had no real authority in these situations — they could not legitimately command the actions of true members of the community. Moreover, although for practical purposes long-term immigrants in a local group were probably indistinguishable from natal members, the difference in status was likely to be revealed at death in the choices of mourners, of inheritors of the deceased's possessions, and of men to avenge the death.

Whatever the composition of the community might be, when any situation demanded joint action, the programmes that selected the actors and steered their activities to desired ends were more or less standardized and rigid. What men did at that time should have duplicated as far as possible what the ancestors or the culture heroes did on similar occasions in the far past, in the Dreamtime. Following the Dreamtime precedent was the ultimate sanction for social behaviour, which meant, obviously, that in these circumstances the form or structure of various group activities was likely to remain constant over long periods of time. No doubt the deliberate seasonal timing of particular performances reinforced this stability and continuity.

There were also of course activities instigated by irregular, contingent events — such as beating off a surprise raid by another group, or avenging a sudden death attributed to sorcery. But even in these cases the significance of the stimulus to action was at once clear to the members of the community, for they had been taught from an early age to recognize it. In addition they had learned what to do about the event, what their roles should be in the subsequent reaction to it. Within the context of local affiliation, the definition of these roles was mainly in terms of the norms of the kinship and religious systems. These provided timeless and ubiquitous guides to action which, the people believed, had met all contingencies in the past and would continue to do so in the future — morally proper master-plans that permitted the actors few, if any, alternative solutions of their problems. Given this basic expression of Aboriginal conservatism, we can see that, whereas the rapid communication of the news of an occurrence

to all members of the tribe might often have proved difficult, the allocation of roles for appropriate group action was simple. Once a person knew of the circumstances, he knew what to do about them; quasi-historical precedent defined his responses.

Take, for instance, raiding and the prosecution of feuds (real warfare, with pitched battles, was not common in Australia). Aggressive behaviour of one kind and another often occurred between individuals and between local or kinship units, less often between larger sections of opposed tribes and very rarely between whole tribes. People fought over actual and fancied personal slights, over previous deaths, over putative sorcery, over ritual prerogatives and, above all, over the allocation of women; territorial conquest and seizure of property were, however, almost unknown. But, despite the frequency of displays of violence within and between Aboriginal groups, the societies were not militaristic; there was no glorification of warfare, there were no permanent classes or groups of full-time fighting men (as existed in parts of Africa) and there was no hierarchy of military command. Although every Aboriginal man was always armed and ready to defend his interests, he was more likely to engage in individualized brawling or in killing from ambush than as a warrior in large-scale, joint actions. Even in those disputes in which kinship and locality might align tribesmen into competing groups of some size, there were rarely any actual military leaders, elected or hereditary, to plan strategy or to direct tactics.¹⁷ However much men might have respected the opinions of brave and skilled fighters, they did not have to take their orders or even accept their advice. In any case the range of techniques of fighting and the variety of likely circumstances were so limited that even young men knew and quickly adopted the appropriate effective methods.

In these kinds of societies, then, where there existed interlocking sets of clearly formulated, publicly accepted and religiously sanctioned norms covering all manner of activities, there was little need or room for chiefs or headmen. Naturally some men were more conversant with certain rules than were others who turned to them for information when necessary; but in general such situations concerned only the definition of religious dogma and ritual statuses. It is of interest that throughout Aboriginal Australia it was only in this field of social action and cultural values that there emerged any real approximation to headmen — men whose knowledge of sacred matters gave them

¹⁷ See, for example, Warner (1937), especially chapter 6.

such prestige that everyone in the community regarded them as the proper people to co-ordinate large-scale ceremonial activities, to specify for the ignorant their social roles on these occasions and to clarify obscure religious and philosophical notions for initiates. But, no matter how much authority people conceded to a ritual leader in the sacred sphere, it did not as a rule extend at all into secular affairs, even within the confines of his own local community, unless he was a man of exceptional personality or intelligence. Moreover, the religious expert did not on this account derive any special freedom from social conventions in the secular world; he had no immunity from criticism or from open violence in everyday disputes. Away from the ceremonial ground he was but another member of an intensely egalitarian society, amenable to the same rules as was everyone else.

This seems to have been true also of the so-called "medicine man" or "clever fellow" in most tribes. His status as one who could both inflict illnesses and cure them was relatively permanent in that the powers of magic and sorcery which a given individual acquired supernaturally could be exercised for years. If such a man demonstrated great ability, the members of his own community, and even those of the neighbouring groups, accorded him a certain prestige. But the putative curative and lethal skills of the medicine man brought him few or no material rewards and gave him no special authority over his countrymen.¹⁸ Doubtless a medicine man on occasions threatened to use his fatal knowledge illicitly in order to coerce members (especially women) of his community; such blackmail, however, not only violated the expectations of his fellows but it also disregarded Dreamtime injunctions to behave morally towards one's tribesmen. The offender was unlikely to live long; sooner or later an indignant tribesman would spear him.

Among earlier writers, such as Curr (1886), Mathew (1899), Spencer and Gillen (1899, 1904) and Howitt (1904), there was a marked inclination to assume that in every Australian tribe government, both in sacred and secular affairs, ultimately rested in the hands of the old men.¹⁹ Subsequent research into Aboriginal social organization in a

¹⁸ See Elkin (1945). It is worth noting that medicine men in south-eastern Australia might have had rather more authority than those elsewhere (Howitt 1904).

¹⁹ A few writers, such as Smyth (1878), Taplin (1897) and Dawson (1881) went further. They asserted the existence of tribal chiefs, either ruling absolutely or in conjunction with councils of elders, but offered no strong evidence to support their contentions.

number of regions has indicated the error of this view.²⁰

It is true that in many tribes there were more or less explicit systems of age-grading, usually based on shared religious experience at successive levels of initiation. They supported, and merged into, systems of ritual advancement and were largely independent of the local organization as such. It would be a mistake, however, to regard such an arrangement as a hierarchy of social classes or statuses that simply culminated in a gerontocracy. There was in fact no solidary group of elders who possessed authority or wielded power throughout the tribe as a whole, or even throughout the constituent local unit. Within the local community the old men might comprise a common-interest group or a clique, but this had no formal features, defined recruitment, or enduring structure. The members of such a coterie commanded some degree of respect merely because they had longer, but not necessarily wider, experience than did their juniors, especially in the ritual field. Such prestige, however, was not the source of real political power.

The limited influence that the elders had on the behaviour of others derived from advice based on past experience, and audiences felt bound to follow such suggestions only when they embodied Dreamtime norms. The old men could command the services of other people only in the usually accepted ways, that is, in terms of specific kinship and ritual rights and privileges, and in turn they were equally constrained to discharge the correlative duties. Age, even when associated with deep knowledge, did not exempt the individual from social obligations; at the most the old person received sympathetic considerations from the young. In general the respect afforded the old because of their greater knowledge tended to be counter-balanced by the loss of prestige that followed the effects of ageing on hunting, fighting and procreative abilities. To an important degree prestige in particular fields had to be continually reinforced by actual performance.

²⁰ See, for instance, Kaberry (1939), Berndt (1945, 1952), Worsley (1954), Meggitt (1962) and Hiatt (1962b). Hiatt, whose views closely approach mine in this matter, has shown how in the last 100 years opinions about Australian tribal government have changed. As he says (1962b), early observers believed that the Aborigines had no governmental institutions but they could not understand how the natives, lacking these, conducted their public life. Later writers asserted that the Aborigines had governmental institutions (such as chieftainship, gerontocracy) but could not explain how these were supposed to function. More recent fieldwork has demonstrated the absence of formal governmental institutions but at the same time has indicated how the Aborigines manage their public affairs in terms of kinship and other norms.

But if fighting men, ritual experts, medicine men, or elders did not furnish extensive or permanent leadership in the tribe, who did organize large-scale activities that involved the whole of the local community or even several neighbouring communities? The answer is that at some time or other these tasks fell to every man of mature age in the group. The man (or men) who took the lead in arranging matters for a particular revenge expedition, or a betrothal, or a circumcision ceremony did so because of his (or their) putative kinship connection with the central figure, be it the deceased, the groom, or the novice. Thus, in some tribes the mother's brothers of the victim avenged his death; the father and elder brothers of the young man amassed his bride price for him; the elder brothers, father's father and mother's mother's brothers of the novice guided him through his initiation.

On the next of these occasions, however, a different individual would be the central character (living or dead) in the drama. The people who had previously occupied the significant statuses would now be related in other ways to the new figure and consequently would now play different and perhaps unimportant roles. There was, therefore, no simple correlation in these societies between prestige and authority. A man with great ritual prestige could be merely an onlooker at some community events, while the current organizer of the activities was a man of little or no prestige — all because of the different kinship relationships concerned.

The likelihood of such frequent fluctuations in the positions of any individuals in various social situations would naturally inhibit the emergence of permanent leaders or headmen in the community with authority in a wide range of sacred and secular affairs. In particular, we should not expect to find the same men representing the local group in all its dealings with other such groups.

In short, although the local communities that made up the Australian tribes were the significant political and administrative units, they had no formal apparatus of government, no enduring hierarchy of authority, no recognized political leaders. In a real sense, the Aborigines exercised self-government.

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