The Kinship Ascription of Primitive Societies: Actuality or Myth?

RUTH FINNEGAN

The Open University, Bletchley, U.K.

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The idea that "primitive" societies are dominated by kinship goes back a long way. Morgan in the nineteenth century put forward the still much cited notion that primitive societies were characterised by having kinship rather than politics1 and the same idea has reappeared in various guises ever since. Usually there is also the implication that primitive communities are characterised by an emphasis on ascription rather than achievement, and by lack of individualism and opportunities for choice. The present article examines this group of assumptions.

Since this close association between kinship and lack of individualism on the one hand and "primitive" societies on the other may seem surprising or outdated to some it may be worth opening with some typical statements reflecting this assumption. The idea was of course a common place among nineteenth-century evolutionists many of whom were as much concerned with a priori contrasts between "primitive" and "civilised" as with a dispassionate appraisal of the facts. However these earlier writings need not detain us – even though in practice some later assertions amount to little more than restatements of such earlier speculations. The relevant statements for discussion here are those of more recent writers. The neo-evolutionist writings of Parsons are a good example here. He refers frequently to "kinship ascription" or "the ascriptive nexus of kinship" in primitive societies, and the way this poses an obstacle to "social evolution"; he writes of –

"the role in primitive societies of ascription of social status to criteria of biological relatedness. The kinship nexus of social organization is intrinsically a 'seamless web' of relationships... The dominance of kinship in social organization is inseparably connected with rigidity. People do what they are required to do by virtue of their kinship status."

Parsons' view is only one instance of what many writers regard, apparently, as a truism, Thus MacIver writes of "tribal government" that it

“differs from all other political forms in that the territorial basis is not sharply defined. In its primary sense a tribe is a community organised on the basis of kinship... Tribal government is characteristic of simple society.”

The same line is followed in Apter’s widely acclaimed book on Ghana. Writing of the local peoples, he describes them as characterised by

“a particular form of social organization, the basis of which is the recognition of kinship structures as the ‘nuclear’ units of the social system. Tribal society as it existed in parts of the Gold Coast was an amalgamation of family units into larger and larger kinship groupings in which totemic genealogy provided a major social guide”.

Again the recent International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences refers us, under "primitive", to “tribal society” where we read that

“no one seriously questions the importance of kinship organization in most tribal societies”.

This kind of point crops up in many contexts and guises. “Primitive society is based upon kinship ties”, “in the primitive societies kinship had a very great importance... in the more civilised groups of the modern world it has far less importance,” “in many simple societies the family is the government” and “primitive society is organized on a kin or tribal, not on a political basis – all meaningful social, economic, and ideological relations have a kin or transfigured kin character.”

Many social anthropologists would not accept the more extreme formulations of this assumption or at least not without further qualification. Nevertheless many of their textbook pronouncements and the relative space they give to discussions of kinship have helped to give weight to this already popular assumption. We are told for instance that in simple societies “most statuses are ascribed... a person’s place in society, his rights and duties, his claim to property, largely depend on his genealogical relationships”, or that

“In many smaller-scale societies kinship’s social importance is paramount. Where a person lives, his group and community membership, whom he should obey and by whom be obeyed, who are his friends and who his enemies... all these matters and many more may be determined by his status in a kinship system. Where everybody is or thinks of himself as being related to nearly everybody else, almost all social relationships must be kinship or affinal ones too”.

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