The Illusion of Tribe

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Introduction

CONTROVERSIAL though the matter is, the most generally acceptable characteristics of a tribal society are perhaps that it is a whole society, with a high degree of self-sufficiency at a near subsistence level, based on a relatively simple technology without writing or literature, politically autonomous and with its own distinctive language, culture and sense of identity, tribal religion being also coterminous with tribal society. Some would insist on further differentiation of the tribal level of social and cultural organization, on the one hand, from the very small scale band level characteristic of hunting and gathering peoples without agriculture, and on the other, from state or state-like organizations found at the upper limit of scale and complexity within the range of non-literate societies. Thus, Sahlin's (1961, 323) speaks of the 'tribal level, as distinguished from less-developed bands and more advanced chiefdoms'. This point of view has not found much favour and can be criticised on a number of counts. At the empirical level, tribes and bands do not appear as distinct as is implied, and the concept of 'chief' and 'chiefdom', while clear to some writers, is highly variable and inconsistent in the ethnographic literature as a whole. The empirical difficulties of distinguishing the tribal level in the broad sense have been considerable, and the addition of two further levels seems to make them insurmountable. It is not by multiplying global distinctions of this sort that we shall progress, but by dealing with more specialised categories of phe-

1 It was only after completing this paper that 'Essays on the Problem of Tribe' (Helm, ed., 1968) became available to me. Many of the same problems are raised, as indeed they have been raised explicitly or implicitly, many times before by the whole body of ethnographic material.

However, Fried's original paper (1966) which provided the stimulus for these essays, was obviously intended as introductory and exploratory rather than conclusive, while the essays themselves are necessarily as diverse as their authors. Moreover, the predominating concern of many of them with evolutionary perspectives and with more purely taxonomic and allied statistical problems are matters which I have deliberately omitted.

There may therefore be a case for a further attempt—and doubtless many others—at a more synoptic statement with some new illustrative materials.
nomina while retaining the general concept of tribe as a convenient initial descriptive label. Dozens of definitions could, of course, be quoted from authoritative anthropological writings, but for the most part, they add nothing to understanding and vary only in emphasis, one stressing language, another politics, another self-identity, and so forth.

For present purposes, to simplify the argument, we shall use tribal society in the more inclusive sense of all those societies which exhibit the first mentioned set of characteristics. On this basis, to what extent do such societies still exist? In the strict sense they cannot exist, since there are no areas of the inhabited earth unclaimed by one sovereign state or another. They can only exist in dwindling pockets so remote that such sovereign claims have not yet been made effective and can be ignored. No tribal society which has lost its political autonomy can continue to be a tribal society in the full sense of this meaning, although many of its members may retain vivid and even nostalgic memories of its former full existence and may continue to be strongly influenced by the values belonging to this former state and still endeavour to act according to them in those fields where new controls and changed needs allow them to do so. It is the melancholy paradox of anthropology that effective study of such social systems dates only from a period so late that they had already ceased to exist in this full sense, so that an element of reconstruction has always entered into the study of them in these terms. But it would be foolish to deny that the end of their existence in the full sense was the beginning of a long transitional period in which their members were in varying degrees becoming incorporated into wider systems, yet continued to retain strong elements of their former state. Neglect of this has vitiated much of the work carried out supposedly in their interests by the development disciplines.

It is not only political autonomy which has been lost, though that was fundamental, and it is well to specify the changes which have generally occurred in respect of the other stated characteristics. They are no longer self sufficient, because various pressures from without and then from within have brought them to depend extensively on goods and services which they cannot produce for themselves. Even where their material well being is still little better than their former subsistence, they have none the less become involved with the wider market economy in countless seemingly irrevocable ways. By the same token, their technology is no longer simple. Even where it is little improved in efficiency, it has come to reflect in its array of tools and weapons, clothes and even foodstuffs, the vast, unseen and distant complex of the industrial world. Almost invariably some of its members have become literate, and even if they have often at the same time tended to become absentees, they none the less remain vital members of it and the very symbols of its passing. Furthermore, they have often, and necessarily, become literate in a foreign language. They have also adopted, of course under strong external persuasion if not pressure, new religious beliefs, practices, and memberships, or at least new sets of ideas, which are incompatible with tribal society. In all these ways, the close identity of language, culture and society (if it ever existed) is now blurred and has