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CHAPTER I

THE MOTHER'S BROTHER IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

AMONGST primitive peoples in many parts of the world a good deal of importance is attached to the relationship of a mother's brother and sister's son. In some instances, the sister's son has certain special rights over the property of his mother's brother. At one time it was usual to regard these customs as being connected with matrilineal institutions, and it was held that their presence in a patrilineal people could be regarded as evidence that that people had at some time in the past been matrilineal. This view is still held by a few anthropologists and has been adopted by Mr. Junod in his book on the BaThonga people of Portuguese East Africa. Referring to the customs relating to the behaviour of the mother's brother and the sister's son to one another, he says: 'Now, having enquired with special care into this most curious feature of the Thonga system, I come to the conclusion that the only possible explanation is that, in former and very remote times, our tribe has passed through the matrilineal stage.' (Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, 1913, Vol. I, P. 253.)

It is with this theory that I wish to deal in this paper; but I do not propose to repeat or add to the objections that have been raised against it by various critics in recent years. Purely negative criticism does not advance a science. The only satisfactory way of getting rid of an unsatisfactory hypothesis is to find a better one. I propose, therefore, to put before you an alternative hypothesis, and if I am successful, not in proving my hypothesis, but in showing that it does give a possible explanation of the facts, I shall at least have refuted the view of Mr. Junod that the explanation he accepts is the 'only possible' one.

For many African tribes we have almost no information about customs of this kind. Not that the customs do not exist, or are not important to the natives themselves, but because the

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systematic and scientific study of the natives of this country has as yet hardly begun. I shall, therefore, have to refer chiefly to the customs of the BaThonga as recorded by Mr. Junod. These are to be found in the first volume of the work quoted above (pp. 225 *et seq.*, and pp. 253 *et seq.*). Some of the more important of them may be summarised as follows:

1. The uterine nephew all through his career is the object of special care on the part of his uncle.
2. When the nephew is sick the mother's brother sacrifices on his behalf.
3. The nephew is permitted to take many liberties with his mother's brother; for example, he may go to his uncle's home and eat up the food that has been prepared for the latter's meal.
4. The nephew claims some of the property of his mother's brother when the latter dies, and may sometimes claim one of the widows.
5. When the mother's brother offers a sacrifice to his ancestors the sister's son steals and consumes the portion of meat or beer offered to the gods.

It must not be supposed that these customs are peculiar to the BaThonga. There is evidence that similar customs may be found amongst other African tribes, and we know of the existence of similar customs amongst other peoples in various parts of the world. In South Africa itself customs of this kind have been found by Mrs. Hoernle amongst the Nama Hottentots. The sister's son may behave with great freedom towards his mother's brother, and may take any particularly fine beast from his herd of cattle, or any particularly fine object that he may possess. On the contrary, the mother's brother may take from his nephew's herd any beast that is deformed or decrepit, and may take any old and worn-out object he may possess.

What is particularly interesting to me is that in the part of Polynesia that I know best, that is, in the Friendly Islands (Tonga) and in Fiji, we find customs that show a very close resemblance to those of the BaThonga. There, also, the sister's son is permitted to take many liberties with his mother's brother, and to take any of his uncle's possessions that he may desire. And there also we find the custom that, when the uncle makes a

sacrifice, the sister's son takes away the portion offered to the gods, and may eat it. I shall, therefore, make occasional references to the Tongan customs in the course of this paper.

These three peoples, the BaThonga, the Nama, and the Tongans, have patrilineal or patriarchal institutions; that is, the children belong to the social group of the father, not to that of the mother; and property is inherited in the male line, passing normally from a father to his son. The view that I am opposing is that the customs relating to the mother's brother can only be explained by supposing that, at some past time, these peoples had matrilineal institutions, such as are found today amongst other primitive peoples, with whom the children belong to the social group of the mother, and property is inherited in the female line, passing from a man to his brother and to his sister's sons.

It is a mistake to suppose that we can understand the institutions of society by studying them in isolation without regard to other institutions with which they coexist and with which they may be correlated, and I wish to call attention to a correlation that seems to exist between customs relating to the mother's brother and customs relating to the father's sister. So far as present information goes, where we find the mother's brother important we also find that the father's sister is equally important, though in a different way. The custom of allowing the sister's son to take liberties with his mother's brother seems to be generally accompanied with an obligation of particular respect and obedience to the father's sister. Mr. Junod says little about the father's sister amongst the BaThonga. Speaking of a man's behaviour to this relative (his *rarana*) he says simply: 'He shows her great respect. However, she is not in any way a mother (*mamana*)' (op. cit., p. 223). About the Nama Hottentots we have better information, and there the father's sister is the object of the very greatest respect on the part of her brother's child. In Tonga this custom is very clearly defined. A man's father's sister is the one relative above all others whom he must respect and obey. If she selects a wife for him he must marry her without even venturing to demur or to voice any objection; and so throughout his life. His father's sister is sacred to him; her word is his law; and one of the greatest offences of which he could be guilty would be to show himself lacking in respect to her.

Now this correlation (which is not confined, of course, to the three instances I have mentioned, but seems, as I have said, to be general) must be taken into account in any explanation of the customs relating to the mother's brother, for the correlated customs are, if I am right, not independent institutions, but part of one system; and no explanation of one part of the system is satisfactory unless it fits in with an analysis of the system as a whole.

In most primitive societies the social relations of individuals are very largely regulated on the basis of kinship. This is brought about by the formation of fixed and more or less definite patterns of behaviour for each of the recognised kinds of relationship. There is a special pattern of behaviour, for example, for a son towards his father, and another for a younger brother towards his elder brother. The particular patterns vary from one society to another; but there are certain fundamental principles or tendencies which appear in all societies, or in all those of a certain type. It is these general tendencies that it is the special task of social anthropology to discover and explain.

Once we start tracing out relationships to any considerable distance the number of different kinds of relatives that it is logically possible to distinguish is very large. This difficulty is avoided in primitive society by a system of classification, by which relatives of what might logically be held to be of different kinds are classified into a limited number of kinds. The principle of classification that is most commonly adopted in primitive society may be stated as that of the equivalence of brothers. In other words if I stand in a particular relation to one man I regard myself as standing in the same general kind of relation to his brother; and similarly with a woman and her sister. In this way the father's brother comes to be regarded as a sort of father, and his sons are, therefore, relatives of the same kind as brothers. Similarly, the mother's sister is regarded as another mother, and her children are therefore brothers and sisters. The system is the one to be found amongst the Bantu tribes of South Africa, and amongst the Nama Hottentots, and also in the Friendly Islands. By means of this principle primitive societies are able to arrive at definite patterns of behaviour towards uncles and aunts and cousins of certain kinds. A man's behaviour towards his father's brother must be of the same general kind as his behaviour

towards his own father and he must behave to his mother's sister according to the same pattern as towards his mother. The children of his father's brother or of the mother's sister must be treated in very much the same way as brothers and sisters.

This principle, however, does not give us immediately any pattern for either the mother's brother or the father's sister. It would be possible, of course, to treat the former as being like a father and the latter as similar to a mother, and this course does seem to have been adopted in a few societies. A tendency in this direction is found in some parts of Africa and in some parts of Polynesia. But it is characteristic of societies in which the classificatory system of kinship is either not fully developed or has been partly effaced.

Where the classificatory system of kinship reaches a high degree of development or elaboration another tendency makes its appearance: the tendency to develop patterns for the mother's brother and the father's sister by regarding the former as a sort of male mother and the latter as a sort of female father. This tendency sometimes makes its appearance in language. Thus, in South Africa the common term for the mother's brother is *malume* or *umalume*, which is a compound formed from the stem for 'mother'—*ma*—and a suffix meaning 'male'. Amongst the BaThonga the father's sister is called *ravana*, a term which Mr. Junod explains as meaning 'female father'. In some South African languages there is no special term for the father's sister; thus in Xosa, she is denoted by a descriptive term *udade bo bawo*, literally 'father's sister'. In Zulu she may be referred to by a similar descriptive term or she may be spoken of simply as *ubaba*, 'father', just like the father's brothers. In the Friendly Islands the mother's brother may be denoted by a special term *tuasina*, or he may be called *fa'e tangata*, literally 'male mother'. This similarity between South Africa and Polynesia cannot, I think, be regarded as accidental; yet there is no possible connection between the Polynesian languages and the Bantu languages, and I find it very difficult to conceive that the two regions have adopted the custom of calling the mother's brother by a term meaning 'male mother' either from one another or from one common source.

Now let us see if we can deduce what ought to be the patterns of behaviour towards the mother's brother and the father's

sister in a patrilineal society on the basis of the principle or tendency which I have suggested is present. To do this we must first know the patterns for the father and the mother respectively, and I think that it will, perhaps, be more reassuring if I go for the definition of these to Mr. Junod's work, as his observations will certainly not have been influenced by the hypothesis that I am trying to prove.

The relationship of father, he says, 'implies respect and even fear. The father, though he does not take much trouble with his children, is, however, their instructor, the one who scolds and punishes. So do also the father's brothers' (op. cit., p. 222). Of a man's own mother he says: 'She is his true *mamana*, and this relation is very deep and tender, combining respect with love. Love, however, generally exceeds respect' (op. cit., p. 224). Of the mother's relation to her children we read that 'She is generally weak with them and is often accused by the father of spoiling them.'

There is some danger in condensed formulæ, but I think we shall not be far wrong in saying that in a strongly patriarchal society, such as we find in South Africa, the father is the one who must be respected and obeyed, and the mother is the one from whom may be expected tenderness and indulgence. I could show you, if it were necessary, that the same thing is true of the family life of the Friendly Islanders.

If, now, we apply the principle that I have suggested is at work in these peoples it will follow that the father's sister is one who must be obeyed and treated with respect, while from the mother's brother indulgence and care may be looked for. But the matter is complicated by another factor. If we consider the relation of a nephew to his uncle and aunt, the question of sex comes in. In primitive societies there is a marked difference in the behaviour of a man towards other men and that towards women. Risking once more a formula, we may say that any considerable degree of familiarity is generally only permitted in such a society as the BaThonga between persons of the same sex. A man must treat his female relatives with greater respect than his male relatives. Consequently the nephew must treat his father's sister with even greater respect than he does his own father. (In just the same way, owing to the principle of respect for age or seniority, a man must treat his father's elder brother with more respect than his own

father.) Inversely, a man may treat his mother's brother, who is of his own sex, with a degree of familiarity that would not be possible with any woman, even his own mother. The influence of sex on the behaviour of kindred is best seen in the relations of brother and sister. In the Friendly Islands and amongst the Nama a man must pay great respect to his sister, particularly his eldest sister, and may never indulge in any familiarities with her. The same thing is true, I believe, of the South African Bantu. In many primitive societies the father's sister and the elder sisters are the objects of the same general kind of behaviour, and in some of these the two kinds of relatives are classified together and denoted by the same name.

We have deduced from our assumed principle a certain pattern of behaviour for the father's sister and for the mother's brother. Now these patterns are exactly what we find amongst the BaThonga, amongst the Hottentots, and in the Friendly Islands. The father's sister is above all relatives the one to be respected and obeyed. The mother's brother is the one relative above all from whom we may expect indulgence, with whom we may be familiar and take liberties. Here, then, is an alternative 'possible explanation' of the customs relating to the mother's brother, and it has this advantage over Mr. Junod's theory that it also explains the correlated customs relating to the father's sister. This brings us, however, not to the end but to the beginning of our enquiry. It is easy enough to invent hypotheses. The important and difficult work begins when we set out to verify them. It will be impossible for me, in the short time available, to make any attempt to verify the hypothesis I have put before you. All I can do is to point out certain lines of study which will, I believe, provide that verification.

The first and most obvious thing to do is to study in detail the behaviour of the sister's son and the mother's brother to one another in matriarchal societies. Unfortunately, there is practically no information on this subject relating to Africa, and very little for any other part of the world. Moreover, there are certain false ideas connected with this distinction of societies into matriarchal and patriarchal that it is necessary to remove before we attempt to go further.

In all societies, primitive or advanced, kinship is necessarily bilateral. The individual is related to certain persons through his

father and to others through his mother, and the kinship system of the society lays down what shall be the character of his dealings with his paternal relatives and his maternal relatives respectively. But society tends to divide into segments (local groups, lineages, clans, etc.), and when the hereditary principle is accepted, as it most frequently is, as the means of determining the membership of a segment, then it is necessary to choose between maternal or paternal descent. When a society is divided into groups with a rule that the children belong to the group of the father we have patrilineal descent, while if the children always belong to the group of the mother the descent is matrilineal.

There is, unfortunately, a great deal of looseness in the use of the terms matriarchal and patriarchal, and for that reason many anthropologists refuse to use them. If we are to use them at all, we must first give exact definitions. A society may be called patriarchal when descent is patrilineal (i.e. the children belong to the group of the father), marriage is patrilocal (i.e. the wife removes to the local group of the husband), inheritance (of property) and succession (to rank) are in the male line, and the family is patripotestal (i.e. the authority over the members of the family is in the hands of the father or his relatives). On the other hand, a society can be called matriarchal when descent, inheritance and succession are in the female line, marriage is matrilocal (the husband removing to the home of his wife), and when the authority over the children is wielded by the mother's relatives.

If this definition of these opposing terms is accepted, it is at once obvious that a great number of primitive societies are neither matriarchal nor patriarchal, though some may incline more to the one side, and others more to the other. Thus, if we examine the tribes of Eastern Australia, which are sometimes spoken of as matriarchal, we find that marriage is patrilocal, so that membership of the local group is inherited in the male line, the authority over the children is chiefly in the hands of the father and his brothers, property (what there is of it) is mostly inherited in the male line, while, as rank is not recognised, there is no question of succession. The only matrilineal institution is the descent of the totemic group, which is through the mother, so that these tribes, so far from being matriarchal, incline rather to the patriarchal side. Kinship amongst them is thoroughly

bilateral, but for most purposes kinship through the father is of more importance than kinship through the mother. There is some evidence, for example, that the obligation to avenge a death falls upon the relatives in the male line rather than upon those in the female line.

We find an interesting instance of this bilateralism, if it may be so called, in South Africa, in the OvaHerero tribe. The facts are not quite certain, but it would seem that this tribe is subdivided into two sets of segments crossing one another. For one set (the *omaanda*) descent is matrilineal, while for the other (*otuzo*) it is patrilineal. A child belongs to the *enda* of its mother and inherits cattle from its mother's brothers, but belongs to the *oruzo* of its father and inherits his ancestral spirits. Authority over the children would seem to be in the hands of the father and his brothers and sisters.

It is now clear, I hope, that the distinction between matriarchal and patriarchal societies is not an absolute but a relative one. Even in the most strongly patriarchal society some social importance is attached to kinship through the mother; and similarly in the most strongly matriarchal society the father and his kindred are always of some importance in the life of the individual.

In Africa we have in the south-east a group of tribes that incline strongly to patriarchy, so much so, in fact, that we may perhaps justifiably speak of them as patriarchal. Descent of the social group, inheritance of property, succession to chieftainship, are all in the male line; marriage is patrilocal, and authority in the family is strongly patripotestal. In the north of Africa, in Kenya and the surrounding countries, there is another group of strongly patriarchal peoples, some of them Bantu-speaking, while others are Nilotic or Hamitic. Between these two patriarchal regions there is a band of peoples stretching apparently right across Africa from east to west, on the level of Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, in which the tendency is towards matriarchal institutions. Descent of the social group, inheritance of property, and succession to the kingship or chieftainship are in the female line. In some of the tribes marriage seems to be matrilocal, at any rate temporarily if not permanently, i.e. a man on marriage has to go and live with his wife's people.

It is about these people and their customs that we urgently need information if we are to understand such matters as the

subject of this paper. Of one tribe of this region we have a fairly full description in the work of Smith and Dale (*The Ila-speaking People of Northern Rhodesia*, 1920). Unfortunately, on the very points with which I am now dealing the information is scanty and certainly very incomplete. There are, however, two points I wish to bring out. The first concerns the behaviour of the mother's brother to his sister's son. We are told that 'the mother's brother is a personage of vast importance; having the power even of life and death over his nephews and nieces, which no other relations, not even the parents, have; he is to be held in honour even above the father. This is *avunculi potestas*, which among the Balla is greater than *patria potestas*. In speaking of the mother's brother, it is customary to use an honorific title given to people who are respected very highly' (op. cit., Vol. I, p. 230). This kind of relation between the mother's brother and the sister's son is obviously what we might expect in a strongly patriarchal society. But how then, on Mr. Junod's theory, can we explain the change which must have taken place from this sort of relation to that which now exists among the BaThonga?

This brings me to another point which it will not be possible to discuss in detail but which has an important bearing on the argument. We have been considering the relation of the sister's son to his mother's brother; but if we are to reach a really final explanation, we must study also the behaviour of a man to his other relatives on the mother's side, and to his mother's group as a whole. Now in the Friendly Islands the peculiar relation between a sister's son and a mother's brother exists also between a daughter's son and his mother's father. The daughter's son must be honoured by his grandfather. He is 'a chief' to him. He may take his grandfather's property, and he may take away the offering that his grandfather makes to the gods at a kava ceremony. The mother's father and the mother's brother are the objects of very similar behaviour patterns, of which the outstanding feature is the indulgence on the one side and the liberty permitted on the other. Now there is evidence of the same thing amongst the BaThonga, but again we lack the full information that we need. Mr. Junod writes that a grandfather 'is more lenient to his grandson by his daughter than his grandson by his son' (op. cit. p. 227). In this connection the custom of calling the mother's brother *kokwana* (grandfather) is significant.

Now here is something that it seems impossible to explain on Mr. Junod's theory. In a strongly patriarchal society the mother's father does not belong to the same group as his grandchild and is not a person from whom property can be inherited or who can exercise authority. Any explanation of the liberties permitted towards the mother's brother cannot be satisfactory unless it also explains the similar liberties towards the mother's father which are found in Polynesia, and apparently to some extent in South Africa. This Mr. Junod's theory clearly does not do, and cannot do.

But on the hypothesis that I have put forward the matter is fairly simple. In primitive society there is a strongly marked tendency to merge the individual in the group to which he or she belongs. The result of this in relation to kinship is a tendency to extend to all the members of a group a certain type of behaviour which has its origin in a relationship to one particular member of the group. Thus the tendency in the BaThonga tribe would seem to be to extend to all the members of the mother's group (family or lineage) a certain pattern of behaviour which is derived from the special pattern that appears in the behaviour of a son towards his mother. Since it is from his mother that he expects care and indulgence he looks for the same sort of treatment from the people of his mother's group, i.e. from all his maternal kin. On the other hand it is to his paternal kin that he owes obedience and respect. The patterns that thus arise in relation to the father and the mother are generalised and extended to the kindred on the one side and on the other. If I had time I think I could show you quite conclusively that this is really the principle that governs the relations between an individual and his mother's kindred in the patriarchal tribes of South Africa. I must leave the demonstration, however, to another occasion. I can do no more now than illustrate my statement.

The custom, often mis-called bride-purchase and generally known in South Africa as *lobola*, is, as Mr. Junod has well shown, a payment made in compensation to a girl's family for her loss when she is taken away in marriage. Now, since in the patriarchal tribes of South Africa a woman belongs to her father's people, the compensation has to be paid to them. But you will find that in many of the tribes a certain portion of the 'marriage payment' is handed over to the mother's brother of the girl for whom it is paid. Thus,

amongst the BaPedi, out of the *lenyalo* cattle one head (called *hloho*) is handed to the mother's brother of the girl. Amongst the BaSotho a portion of the cattle received for a girl on her marriage may sometimes be taken by her mother's brother, this being known as *ditsoa*. Now the natives state that the *ditsoa* cattle received by the mother's brother are really held by him on behalf of his sister's children. If one of his sister's sons or daughters is ill he may be required to offer a sacrifice to his ancestral spirits, and he then takes a beast from the *ditsoa* herd. Also, when the sister's son wishes to obtain a wife, he may go to his mother's brother to help him to find the necessary cattle and his uncle may give him some of the *ditsoa* cattle received at the marriage of his sister, or may even give him cattle from his own herd, trusting to being repaid from the *ditsoa* cattle to be received in the future from the marriage of a niece. I believe that the Native Appeal Court has decided that the payment of *ditsoa* to the mother's brother is a voluntary matter and cannot be regarded as a legal obligation, and with that judgment I am in agreement. I quote this custom because it illustrates the sort of interest that the mother's brother is expected to take in his sister's son, in helping him and looking after his welfare. It brings us back to the question as to why the mother's brother may be asked to offer sacrifices when his nephew is sick.

In south-east Africa ancestor worship is patrilineal, i.e. a man worships and takes part in sacrifices to the spirits of his deceased relatives in the male line. Mr. Junod's statements about the BaThonga are not entirely clear. In one place he says that each family has two sets of gods, those on the father's side and those on the mother's; they are equal in dignity and both can be invoked (op. cit., II, p. 349, and I, p. 256, note). But in another place it is stated that if an offering has to be made to the gods of the mother's family this must be through the maternal relatives, the *malume* (op. cit., II, p. 367). Other passages confirm this and show us that ancestral spirits can only be directly approached in any ritual by their descendants in the male line.

The natives of the Transkei are very definite in their statements to me that a person's maternal gods, the patrilineal ancestors of his mother, will never inflict supernatural punishment upon him by making him sick. (I am not quite so sure about the Sotho tribes, but I think that they probably have similar views.) On

the other hand a married woman can receive protection from the ancestral spirits of her patrilineal lineage, and so can her young children as long as they are attached to her. For children are only fully incorporated in their father's lineage when they reach adolescence. So in the Transkei a woman, when she marries, should be given a cow, the *ubulunga* cow, by her father, from the herd of her lineage, which she can take to her new home. Since she may not drink the milk from her husband's herd during the early period of her married life she can be provided with milk from this beast that comes from her lineage. This cow constitutes a link between herself and her lineage, its cattle, and its gods, for cattle are the material link between the living members of the lineage and the ancestral spirits. So if she is sick she can make for herself a necklace of hairs from the tail of this cow and so put herself under the protection of her lineage gods. Moreover, if one of her infant children is sick, she can make a similar necklace which is thought to give protection to the child. When her son is grown up he should receive an *ubulunga* bull from his father's herd, and thereafter it is from the tail of this beast that he will make a protective amulet; similarly the daughter, when she marries, is detached from her mother, and may receive an *ubulunga* cow from her father.

But though, according to the statements made to me, the maternal ancestors will not punish their descendant with sickness, they can be appealed to for help. When, therefore, a child is sick the parents may go to the mother's brother of the child, or to the mother's father if he is still living, and ask that a sacrifice shall be offered, and an appeal for help made to the child's maternal ancestors. This, at any rate, is stated as a practice in the Sotho tribes, and one of the purposes of the *ditsoa* cattle that go from the marriage payment to the mother's brother of the bride is said to be to make provision for such sacrifices if they should be needed.

This brings us to the final extension of the principle that I have suggested as the basis of the customs relating to the mother's brother. The pattern of behaviour towards the mother, which is developed in the family by reason of the nature of the family group and its social life, is extended with suitable modifications to the mother's sister and to the mother's brother, then to the group of maternal kindred as a whole, and finally to the maternal gods, the ancestors of the mother's group. In the same way the pattern

of behaviour towards the father is extended to the father's brothers and sisters, and to the whole of the father's group (or rather to all the older members of it, the principle of age making important modifications necessary), and finally to the paternal gods.

The father and his relatives must be obeyed and respected (even worshipped, in the original sense of the word), and so therefore also must be the paternal ancestors. The father punishes his children, and so may the ancestors on the father's side. On the other hand, the mother is tender and indulgent to her child, and her relatives are expected to be the same, and so also the maternal spirits.

A very important principle, which I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere (*The Andaman Islanders*, Chapter V), is that the social values current in a primitive society are maintained by being expressed in ceremonial or ritual customs. The set of values that we here meet with in the relations of an individual to his kindred on the two sides must, therefore, also have their proper ritual expression. The subject is too vast to deal with at all adequately here, but I wish to discuss one point. Amongst the BaThonga, and also in Western Polynesia (Fiji and Tonga), the sister's son (or in Tonga also the daughter's son) intervenes in the sacrificial ritual. Mr. Junod describes a ceremony of crushing down the hut of a dead man in which the *batukulu* (sister's children) play an important part. They kill and distribute the sacrificial victims and when the officiating priest makes his prayer to the spirit of the dead man it is the sister's sons who, after a time, interrupt or 'cut' the prayer and bring it to an end. They then, among the BaThonga clans, seize the portions of the sacrifice that have been dedicated to the spirit of the dead man and run away with them, 'stealing' them (op. cit., I, p. 162).

I would suggest that the meaning of this is that it gives a ritual expression to the special relation that exists between the sister's son and the mother's brother. When the uncle is alive the nephews have the right to go to his village and take his food. Now that he is dead they come and do this again, as part of the funeral ritual, and as it were for the last time, i.e. they come and steal portions of meat and beer that are put aside as the portion of the deceased man.

The same sort of explanation will be found to hold, I think, of the part played in sacrificial and other ritual by the sister's

son both amongst the Bantu of South Africa and also in Tonga and Fiji. As a man fears his father, so he fears and reverences his paternal ancestors, but he has no fear of his mother's brother, and so may act irreverently to his maternal ancestors; he is, indeed, required by custom so to act on certain occasions, thus giving ritual expression to the special social relations between a man and his maternal relatives in accordance with the general function of ritual, as I understand it.

It will, perhaps, be of help if I give you a final brief statement of the hypothesis I am advancing, with the assumptions involved in it and some of its important implications.

1. The characteristic of most of these societies that we call primitive is that the conduct of individuals to one another is very largely regulated on the basis of kinship, this being brought about by the formation of fixed patterns of behaviour for each recognised kind of kinship relation.
2. This is sometimes associated with a segmentary organisation of society, i.e. a condition in which the whole society is divided into a number of segments (lineages, clans).
3. While kinship is always and necessarily bilateral, or cognatic, the segmentary organisation requires the adoption of the unilineal principle, and a choice has to be made between patrilineal and matrilineal institutions.
4. In patrilineal societies of a certain type, the special pattern of behaviour between a sister's son and the mother's brother is derived from the pattern of behaviour between the child and the mother, which is itself the product of the social life within the family in the narrow sense.
5. This same kind of behaviour tends to be extended to all the maternal relatives, i.e. to the whole family or group to which the mother's brother belongs.¹

¹ This extension from the mother's brother to the other maternal relatives is shown in the BaThonga tribe in the kinship terminology. The term *malume*, primarily applied to the mother's brother, is extended to the sons of those men, who are also *malume*. If my mother's brothers are dead it is their sons who will have to sacrifice on my behalf to my maternal ancestors. In the northern part of the tribe the term *malume* has gone out of use, and the mother's father, the mother's brother, and the sons of the mother's brother are all called *kokuwana* (grandfather). However absurd it may seem to us to call a mother's brother's son, who may be actually younger than the speaker, by a word meaning 'grandfather', the argument of this paper will enable us to see some meaning in it. The person who must sacrifice on my behalf to my maternal

6. In societies with patrilineal ancestor worship (such as the Ba Thonga and the Friendly Islanders) the same type of behaviour may also be extended to the gods of the mother's family.
7. The special kind of behaviour to the maternal relatives (living and dead) or to the maternal group and its gods and sacra, is expressed in definite ritual customs, the function of ritual here, as elsewhere, being to fix and make permanent certain types of behaviour, with the obligations and sentiments involved therein.

In conclusion, may I point out that I have selected the subject of my contribution to this meeting because it is one not only of theoretical but also of practical interest. For instance, there is the question as to whether the Native Appeal Court was really right in its judgment that the payment of the *ditisoa* cattle to the mother's brother of a bride is not a legal but only a moral obligation. So far as I have been able to form an opinion, I should say that the judgment was right.

The whole subject of the payments at marriage (*lobola*) is one of considerable practical importance at the present time to missionaries and magistrates, and to the natives themselves. Now the study of the exact position in which a person stands to his maternal relatives is one without which it is impossible to arrive at a completely accurate understanding of the customs of *lobola*. One of the chief functions of *lobola* is to fix the social position of the children of a marriage. If the proper payment is made by a family, then the children of the woman who comes to them in exchange for the cattle belong to that family, and its gods are their gods. The natives consider that the strongest of all social bonds is that between a child and its mother, and therefore by the extension that inevitably takes place there is a very strong bond between the child and its mother's family. The function of the *lobola* payment is not to destroy but to modify this bond, and to place the children definitely in the father's family and group for all matters concerning not only the social but also the religious

ancestors is first my mother's father, then, if he is dead, my mother's brother, and after the decease of the latter, his son, who may be younger than I am. There is a similarity of function for these three relationships, a single general pattern of behaviour for me towards them all and this is again similar in general to that for grandfathers. The nomenclature is, therefore, appropriate.

life of the tribe. If no *lobola* is paid the child inevitably belongs to the mother's family, though its position is then irregular. But the woman for whom the *lobola* is paid does not become a member of the husband's family; their gods are not her gods; and that is the final test. I have said enough, I hope, to show that the proper understanding of customs relating to the mother's brother is a necessary preliminary to any final theory of *lobola*.

units are related is the organic structure. As the terms are here used the organism is *not* itself the structure; it is a collection of units (cells or molecules) arranged in a structure, i.e. in a set of relations; the organism *has* a structure. Two mature animals of the same species and sex consist of similar units combined in a similar structure. The structure is thus to be defined as a set of relations between entities. (The structure of a cell is in the same way a set of relations between complex molecules, and the structure of an atom is a set of relations between electrons and protons.) As long as it lives the organism preserves a certain continuity of structure although it does not preserve the complete identity of its constituent parts. It loses some of its constituent molecules by respiration or excretion; it takes in others by respiration and alimentary absorption. Over a period its constituent cells do not remain the same. But the structural arrangement of the constituent units does remain similar. The process by which this structural continuity of the organism is maintained is called life. The life-process consists of the activities and interactions of the constituent units of the organism, the cells, and the organs into which the cells are united.

As the word function is here being used the life of an organism is conceived as the *functioning* of its structure. It is through and by the continuity of the functioning that the continuity of the structure is preserved. If we consider any recurrent part of the life-process, such as respiration, digestion, etc., its *function* is the part it plays in, the contribution it makes to, the life of the organism as a whole. As the terms are here being used a cell or an organ has an *activity* and that activity has a *function*. It is true that we commonly speak of the secretion of gastric fluid as a 'function' of the stomach. As the words are here used we should say that this is an 'activity' of the stomach, the 'function' of which is to change the proteins of food into a form in which these are absorbed and distributed by the blood to the tissues.¹ We may note that the function of a recurrent physiological process is thus a correspondence between it and the needs (i.e. necessary conditions of existence) of the organism.

¹ The insistence on this precise form of terminology is only for the sake of the analogy that is to be drawn. I have no objection to the use of the term function in physiology to denote both the activity of an organ and the results of that activity in maintaining life.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE CONCEPT OF FUNCTION IN SOCIAL SCIENCE¹

THE concept of function applied to human societies is based on an analogy between social life and organic life. The recognition of the analogy and of some of its implications is not new. In the nineteenth century the analogy, the concept of function, and the word itself appear frequently in social philosophy and sociology. So far as I know the first systematic formulation of the concept as applying to the strictly scientific study of society was that of Emile Durkheim in 1895. (*Règles de la Méthode Sociologique*.)

Durkheim's definition is that the 'function' of a social institution is the correspondence between it and the needs (*besoins* in French) of the social organism. This definition requires some elaboration. In the first place, to avoid possible ambiguity and in particular the possibility of a teleological interpretation, I would like to substitute for the term 'needs' the term 'necessary conditions of existence', or, if the term 'need' is used, it is to be understood only in this sense. It may be here noted, as a point to be returned to, that any attempt to apply this concept of function in social science involves the assumption that there *are* necessary conditions of existence for human societies just as there are for animal organisms, and that they can be discovered by the proper kind of scientific enquiry.

For the further elucidation of the concept it is convenient to use the analogy between social life and organic life. Like all analogies it has to be used with care. An animal organism is an agglomeration of cells and interstitial fluids arranged in relation to one another not as an aggregate but as an integrated living whole. For the biochemist, it is a complexly integrated system of complex molecules. The system of relations by which these

¹ This paper, which is based on comments that I made on a paper read by Dr. Lesser to the American Anthropological Association, is reprinted from the *American Anthropologist*, Vol. XXXVII, p. 3, 1935, where it accompanied Dr. Lesser's paper.

If we set out upon a systematic investigation of the nature of organisms and organic life there are three sets of problems presented to us. (There are, in addition, certain other sets of problems concerning aspects or characteristics of organic life with which we are not here concerned.) One is that of morphology—what kinds of organic structures are there, what similarities and variations do they show, and how can they be classified? Second are the problems of physiology—how, in general, do organic structures function, what, therefore, is the nature of the life-process? Third are the problems of evolution or development—how do new types of organisms come into existence?

To turn from organic life to social life, if we examine such a community as an African or Australian tribe we can recognise the existence of a social structure. Individual human beings, the essential units in this instance, are connected by a definite set of social relations into an integrated whole. The continuity of the social structure, like that of an organic structure, is not destroyed by changes in the units. Individuals may leave the society, by death or otherwise; others may enter it. The continuity of structure is maintained by the process of social life, which consists of the activities and interactions of the individual human beings and of the organised groups into which they are united. The social life of the community is here defined as the *functioning* of the social structure. The *function* of any recurrent activity, such as the punishment of a crime, or a funeral ceremony, is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the structural continuity.

The concept of function as here defined thus involves the notion of a *structure* consisting of a *set of relations* amongst *unit entities*, the *continuity* of the structure being maintained by a *life-process* made up of the *activities* of the constituent units.

If, with these concepts in mind, we set out on a systematic investigation of the nature of human society and of social life, we find presented to us three sets of problems. First, the problems of social morphology—what kinds of social structures are there, what are their similarities and differences, how are they to be classified? Second, the problems of social physiology—how do social structures function? Third, the problems of development—how do new types of social structure come into existence?

Two important points where the analogy between organism and

society breaks down must be noted. In an animal organism it is possible to observe the organic structure to some extent independently of its functioning. It is therefore possible to make a morphology which is independent of physiology. But in human society the social structure as a whole can only be *observed* in its functioning. Some of the features of social structure, such as the geographical distribution of individuals and groups can be directly observed, but most of the social relations which in their totality constitute the structure, such as relations of father and son, buyer and seller, ruler and subject, cannot be observed except in the social activities in which the relations are functioning. It follows that a social morphology cannot be established independently of a social physiology.

The second point is that an animal organism does not, in the course of its life, change its structural type. A pig does not become a hippopotamus. (The development of the animal from germination to maturity is not a change of type since the process in all its stages is typical for the species.) On the other hand a society in the course of its history can and does change its structural type without any breach of continuity.

By the definition here offered 'function' is the contribution which a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part. The function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total social system. Such a view implies that a social system (the total social structure of a society together with the totality of social usages in which that structure appears and on which it depends for its continued existence) has a certain kind of unity, which we may speak of as a functional unity. We may define it as a condition in which all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency, i.e. without producing persistent conflicts which can neither be resolved nor regulated.¹

This idea of the functional unity of a social system is, of course, a hypothesis. But it is one which, to the functionalist, it seems worth while to test by systematic examination of the facts.

There is another aspect of functional theory that should be briefly mentioned. To return to the analogy of social life and

¹ Opposition, i.e. organised and regulated antagonism, is, of course, an essential feature of every social system.

organic life, we recognise that an organism may function more or less efficiently and so we set up a special science of pathology to deal with all phenomena of disfunction. We distinguish in an organism what we call health and disease. The Greeks of the fifth century B.C. thought that one might apply the same notion to society, to the city-state, distinguishing conditions of *eunomia*, good order, social health, from *dysnomia*, disorder, social ill-health. In the nineteenth century Durkheim, in his application of the notion of function, sought to lay the basis for a scientific social pathology, based on a morphology and a physiology.¹ In his works, particularly those on suicide and the division of labour, he attempted to find objective criteria by which to judge whether a given society at a given time is normal or pathological, eunomic or dysnomic. For example, he tried to show that the increase of the rate of suicide in many countries during part of the nineteenth century is symptomatic of a dysnomic or, in his terminology, anomie, social condition. Probably there is no sociologist who would hold that Durkheim really succeeded in establishing an objective basis for a science of social pathology.²

In relation to organic structures we can find strictly objective criteria by which to distinguish disease from health, pathological from normal, for disease is that which either threatens the organism with death (the dissolution of its structure) or interferes with the activities which are characteristic of the organic type. Societies do not die in the same sense that animals die and therefore we cannot define dysnomia as that which leads, if unchecked, to the death of a society. Further, a society differs from an organism in that it can change its structural type, or can be absorbed as an integral part of a larger society. Therefore we cannot define dysnomia as a disturbance of the usual activities of a social type (as Durkheim tried to do).

Let us return for a moment to the Greeks. They conceived the health of an organism and the eunomia of a society as being in each instance a condition of the harmonious working together

¹ For what is here called dysnomia Durkheim used the term *anomie* (in French). This is to my mind inappropriate. Health and disease, eunomia and dysnomia, are essentially relative terms.

² I would personally agree in the main with the criticisms of Roger Lacombe (*La Méthode Sociologique de Durkheim*, 1926, ch. iv) on Durkheim's general theory of social pathology, and with the criticisms of Durkheim's treatment of suicide presented by Halbwachs, *Les Causes du Suicide*.

of its parts.¹ Now this, where society is concerned, is the same thing as what was considered above as the functional unity or inner consistency of a social system, and it is suggested that for the degree of functional unity of a particular society it may be possible to establish a purely objective criterion. Admittedly this cannot be done at present; but the science of human society is as yet in its extreme infancy. So that it may be that we should say that, while an organism that is attacked by a virulent disease will react thereto, and, if its reaction fails, will die, a society that is thrown into a condition of functional disunity or inconsistency (for this we now provisionally identify with dysnomia) will not die, except in such comparatively rare instances as an Australian tribe overwhelmed by the white man's destructive force, but will continue to struggle toward some sort of eunomia, some kind of social health, and may, in the course of this, change its structural type. This process, it seems, the 'functionalist' has ample opportunities of observing at the present day, in native peoples subjected to the domination of the civilised nations, and in those nations themselves.²

Space will not allow a discussion here of another aspect of functional theory, viz. the question whether change of social type is or is not dependent on function, i.e. on the laws of social physiology. My own view is that there is such a dependence and that its nature can be studied in the development of the legal and political institutions, the economic systems and the religions of Europe through the last twenty-five centuries. For the preliterate societies with which anthropology is concerned, it is not possible to study the details of long processes of change of type. The one kind of change which the anthropologist can observe is the disintegration of social structures. Yet even here we can observe and compare spontaneous movements towards reintegration. We have, for instance, in Africa, in Oceania, and in America the appearance of new religions which can be interpreted on a functional hypothesis

¹ See, for example, the Fourth Book of Plato's *Republic*.

² To avoid misunderstanding it is perhaps necessary to observe that this distinction of eunomic and dysnomic social conditions does not give us any evaluation of these societies as 'good' or 'bad'. A savage tribe practising polygamy, cannibalism, and sorcery can possibly show a higher degree of functional unity or consistency than the United States of 1935. This objective judgment, for such it must be if it is to be scientific, is something very different from any judgment as to which of the two social systems is the better, the more to be desired or approved.

as attempts to relieve a condition of social dysnomia produced by the rapid modification of the social life through contact with white civilisation.

The concept of function as defined above constitutes a 'working hypothesis' by which a number of problems are formulated for investigation. No scientific enquiry is possible without some such formulation of working hypotheses. Two remarks are necessary here. One is that the hypothesis does not require the dogmatic assertion that everything in the life of every community has a function. It only requires the assumption that it *may* have one, and that we are justified in seeking to discover it. The second is that what appears to be the same social usage in two societies may have different functions in the two. Thus the practice of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church of today has very different functions from those of celibacy in the early Christian Church. In other words, in order to define a social usage, and therefore in order to make valid comparisons between the usages of different peoples or periods, it is necessary to consider not merely the form of the usage but also its function. On this basis, for example, belief in a Supreme Being in a simple society is something different from such a belief in a modern civilised community.

The acceptance of the functional hypothesis or point of view outlined above results in the recognition of a vast number of problems for the solution of which there are required wide comparative studies of societies of many diverse types and also intensive studies of as many single societies as possible. In field studies of the simpler peoples it leads, first of all, to a direct study of the social life of the community as the functioning of a social structure, and of this there are several examples in recent literature. Since the function of a social activity is to be found by examining its effects upon individuals, these are studied, either in the average individual or in both average and exceptional individuals. Further, the hypothesis leads to attempts to investigate directly the functional consistency or unity of a social system and to determine as far as possible in each instance the nature of that unity. Such field studies will obviously be different in many ways from studies carried out from other points of view, e.g. the ethnological point of view that lays emphasis on diffusion. We do not have to say that one point of view is better than another, but only that they

are different, and any particular piece of work should be judged in reference to what it aims to do.

If the view here outlined is taken as one form of 'functionalism', a few remarks on Dr. Lesser's paper become permissible. He makes reference to a difference of 'content' in functional and non-functional anthropology. From the point of view here presented the 'content' or subject-matter of social anthropology is the whole social life of a people in all its aspects. For convenience of handling it is often necessary to devote special attention to some particular part or aspect of the social life, but if functionalism means anything at all it does mean the attempt to see the social life of a people as a whole, as a functional unity.

Dr. Lesser speaks of the functionalist as stressing 'the psychological aspects of culture', I presume that he here refers to the functionalist's recognition that the usages of a society work or 'function' only through their effects in the life, i.e. in the thoughts, sentiments and actions of individuals.

The 'functionalist' point of view here presented does therefore imply that we have to investigate as thoroughly as possible all aspects of social life, considering them in relation to one another, and that an essential part of the task is the investigation of the individual and of the way in which he is moulded by or adjusted to the social life.

Turning from content to method Dr. Lesser seems to find some conflict between the functional point of view and the historical. This is reminiscent of the attempts formerly made to see a conflict between sociology and history. There need be no conflict, but there is a difference.

There is not, and cannot be, any conflict between the functional hypothesis and the view that any culture, any social system, is the end-result of a unique series of historical accidents. The process of development of the race-horse from its five-toed ancestor was a unique series of historical accidents. This does not conflict with the view of the physiologist that the horse of today and all the antecedent forms conform or conformed to physiological laws, i.e. to the necessary conditions of organic existence. Palaeontology and physiology are not in conflict. One 'explanation' of the race-horse is to be found in its history—how it came to be just what it is and where it is. Another and entirely independent 'explanation' is to show how the horse is a special exemplification of physiological

laws. Similarly one 'explanation' of a social system will be its history, where we know it—the detailed account of how it came to what it is and where it is. Another 'explanation' of the same system is obtained by showing (as the functionalist attempts to do) that it is a special exemplification of laws of social physiology or social functioning. The two kinds of explanation do not conflict, but supplement one another.¹

The functional hypothesis is in conflict with two views that are held by some ethnologists, and it is probably these, held as they often are without precise formulation, that are the cause of the antagonism to that approach. One is the 'shreds and patches' theory of culture, the designation being taken from a phrase of Professor Lowie² when he speaks of 'that planless hodge-podge, that thing of shreds and patches called civilisation'. The concentration of attention on what is called the diffusion of culture-traits tends to produce a conception of culture as a collection of disparate entities (the so-called traits) brought together by pure historical accident and having only accidental relations to one another. The conception is rarely formulated and maintained with any precision, but as a half-unconscious point of view it does seem to control the thinking of many ethnologists. It is, of course, in direct conflict with the hypothesis of the functional unity of social systems.

The second view which is in direct conflict with the functional hypothesis is the view that there are no discoverable significant sociological laws such as the functionalist is seeking. I know that

¹ I see no reason at all why the two kinds of study—the historical and the functional—should not be carried on side by side in perfect harmony. In fact, for fourteen years I have been teaching both the historical and geographical study of peoples under the name of ethnology in close association with archaeology, and the functional study of social systems under the name of social anthropology. I do think that there are many disadvantages in mixing the two subjects together and confusing them. See 'The Methods of Ethnology and Social Anthropology' (*South African Journal of Science*, 1923, pp. 124-47).

² *Primitive Society*, p. 441. A concise statement of this point of view is the following passage from Dr. Ruth Benedict's 'The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America' (*Memoirs, American Anthropological Association*, 29, 1923), p. 84: 'It is, so far as we can see, an ultimate fact of human nature that man builds up his culture out of disparate elements, combining and recombining them; and until we have abandoned the superstition that the result is an organism functionally interrelated, we shall be unable to see our cultural life objectively, or to control its manifestations.' I think that probably neither Professor Lowie nor Dr. Benedict would, at the present time, maintain this view of the nature of culture.

some two or three ethnologists say that they hold this view, but I have found it impossible to know what they mean, or on what sort of evidence (rational or empirical) they would base their contention. Generalisations about any sort of subject matter are of two kinds: the generalisations of common opinion, and generalisations that have been verified or demonstrated by a systematic examination of evidence afforded by precise observations systematically made. Generalisations of the latter kind are called scientific laws. Those who hold that there are no laws of human society cannot hold that there are no generalisations about human society because they themselves hold such generalisations and even make new ones of their own. They must therefore hold that in the field of social phenomena, in contradistinction to physical and biological phenomena, any attempt at the systematic testing of existing generalisations or towards the discovery and verification of new ones, is, for some unexplained reason, futile, or, as Dr. Radin puts it, 'crying for the moon'. Argument against such a contention is unprofitable or indeed impossible.