

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND.

LECTURE VII.

1. THE CEREMONIAL INSTITUTIONS OF PRIMITIVE PEOPLES  
THE MEANS OF MAINTAINING SOCIAL SOLIDARITY.

1. The culture of a people includes the whole mass of customs and institutions by means of which a group of human beings has maintained itself in some measure of comfort, and with some measure of human aspiration in some particular environment.

2. For such a culture to exist at all, three things are necessary:-

- (a) There must be a mode of subsistence which the environment is capable of supplying, and which is sufficient to support the population relying upon it.
- (b) There must be provision for the care of the children and so for the perpetuation of the society, else there can be no culture at all.
- (c) There must be means of maintaining the cohesion of the society, holding the individuals together, so that from one generation to another we can talk of the same essential culture pervading the group.

It is with the last of these conditions that we are concerned in this lecture. How are the individuals in a society moulded so that they can conform to, and carry on, the common life of the group? What is the nature of the forces which hold individuals together in these social groups?

3. These forces must be something existing in the individuals, but they are produced only by the action of many individuals on each. They are not the product of the individuals taken singly, but of the individuals organised in a group, a society. They have to be produced anew in each generation.

Human beings are the most plastic of all animals. They are born with the fewest and vaguest instincts of any of the animals, so that it depends to a large extent on the society into which they are born, how these instincts will be developed and used.

The society trains these instincts and inborn endowments of the individuals so that his behaviour in every day life is determined by certain habits of mind and body, by certain dispositions and sentiments which are the result of this training.

4. A Sentiment is an organised system of tendencies in reference to some particular object or situation, developed from the innate tendencies with which every individual is endowed to a greater or less extent. (For further details here, consult McDougall's Social Psychology and The Group Mind)

5. One great social moulding force is language.

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Language is essentially a social institution, something which we, as individuals, have not made; something with a long tradition behind it, with laws of growth and development which none of us can consciously alter; laws about which even the phoneticians and philologists of today still know comparatively little. So, in learning this language of the society in which we live, we are already moulded to a certain extent to the ways of thought of that society.

6. The teaching of a language, however, is not as a rule organised, whereas the training of the sentiments on which the well-being of the society rests, is so organised. The first training of a child, and perhaps the most important, is through the medium of the family in all societies. Here, the sanctions of ridicule and reprobation on the one hand, and definite rewards to the self-regarding sentiments on the other hand, are largely used as a stimuli. A strong feeling of attachment to the family is inculcated, also interest in its well-being and pride in its achievements.
7. Similar sentiments must also be developed with regard to the Society as a whole, that is, patriotism must be instilled into the minds of the individuals of all healthy groups. This can only be done by training the individuals to share those sentiments on which the well-being of the whole is thought to rest. For example:-
- (a) In Hunting Communities, these sentiments are largely connected with the animals and plants upon which the society depends for its food.
- (b) In Pastoral Societies, life depends on the flocks and herds, and we shall find that these become the objects of ritual and of strong sentiments, as also the grass on which these animals depend for food, and the rain which brings the good season.
- (c) In Cultivating Societies, it is the seed time and the harvests, the rain and the grain, which become ritual objects.
8. In order to train these necessary sentiments, there must be an active participation at frequent intervals in the practice of these sentiments, otherwise they will neither be formed, nor will they remain vigorous once they are formed. This practice is provided for in the Ceremonial of a people. We may define Ritual or Ceremonial then, as the means for expression of sentiments. Every society has its own Ceremonial institutions, and it is, therefore, necessary to study each society intensively, if we wish really to understand the part played by any ceremonial in it.

One of the chief means used for maintaining the unity

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of a group, is to have some common emblem, symbol, or ritual object which represents the unity of the group, and towards which a definite ritual behaviour is demanded. A rite we may define as a definite mode of behaviour demanded by the society of all its members on certain definite occasions, or towards certain definite objects.

A flag, a totem, a praise name, may all be used as emblems of the unity of groups. The ceremony, or rite, of saluting the flag, "trooping the colours", etc. The most powerful ritual object expressive of the unity of a group is a King. (The King of England as symbolising the unity of the British Commonwealth of Nations).

9. Another very frequent method used in primitive communities for developing and maintaining the senses of group solidarity, is the Dance, accompanied always, or nearly always, by a song.

The dance is rythmical, and so enables a number of persons to join in the same actions at the same time, and to perform them as one body. The melody of the song too, helps to maintain the rythm and so to create harmony in the group. We have here then, a very complete joint social activity. The individual is bound to adapt himself to the rythm; he must keep time; he feels himself compelled as it were, by the rythm, and so he is carried away by something which comes to him from outside, and yet which brings him a sense of joyous well-being and of being at one with his fellows.

In the dance too, we have a means by which the self-regarding sentiments can be exercised under social control at times, and on conditions regulated by the society.

We find then, that the dance is employed to create social harmony, or to re-establish it whenever it is threatened, e.g. after a death, or whenever it is especially important to have social harmony at a high pitch, e.g. before a fight.

On the other hand, the value of social communion is impressed upon the minds of individuals by the fact that, whenever they are for any reason withdrawn from the social life, e.g. young people who are being initiated, people who have not been received back into the society after a death, after a birth, after sickness, etc., they are not permitted to take part in the dance.

10. Another means of maintaining social solidarity, is the control of all ornamentation, all clothing, all decoration or other modification of the body. Very often every detail of the dress is significant of the specific relations existing at the time between the individual and the society. There is one type of dress which young children wear, another which must be worn by initiated youths and girls, and so on, and it is the society which, through some little ceremony, confers the right to adopt the new type of dress.

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So too, with ornament and painting of the body. When an individual is in harmony with the society, when the society has cause to be well pleased with her or him, then ornament is recommended and allowed, but when there is no such cause, the individual is not allowed to display his self-regarding sentiments in this way. We may say, therefore, that the most important function of any such adorning of the body is to express, or mark, the personal value of the decorated individual. The occasions upon which such personal decoration is used, are strictly defined by custom, e.g. Bride and Bridegroom are decorated, also the successful hunter, or the newly dead.

11. A person's name plays a very significant part in all primitive societies. There is a very special relation between the name of anything and its fundamental characteristics. Hence, if there is a change in these characteristics, the name must be changed. So we find that very often for each change of status of a person in a group, he is endowed with a new name, e.g., girls and boys at puberty, women after childbirth or after illness.

On the other hand, whenever the person is for some reason withdrawn from the social life, his name, which is the expression or the symbol of his social personality, must not be mentioned. It is taboo. The name is suppressed until he takes his place in the social life once more., e.g. the name of a newly dead person, or those of a bridal pair etc., are not mentioned. Probably every temporary avoidance of a name can be explained as due to the fact that the person is prevented from taking his or her place in the life of the society, whereas, a taboo on the mention of a person's name, except in very special circumstances, is due to the name being the symbol of a very special ritual relation between the individual and the society, or to the name being a symbol of a ritual object itself, e.g. the taboo against pronouncing the secret name of Jehovah.

12. Another great class of ceremonial institutions deals with the gradual initiation of the individual into the life of the society. In this way the value of social institutions is impressed on the minds of the individuals. Such are the ceremonies connected with birth, initiation, marriage etc. By means of these ceremonies, the society makes its members actively participate in the keeping alive of the sentiments which it holds with regard to these essential processes in the social life.

13. Finally another means, and a very important one, for maintaining social solidarity, is making everything on which society depends for its well-being, an object of ritual. Towards every important possession of the society, towards every object for which the society has

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constant and important uses, the individual is made to experience a feeling of dependence. The more important the place a thing occupies in the social life, the greater is the degree of protective power attributed to it, or the greater is the dangerous power it is thought to have when not used in exactly the way prescribed by the society, and at the time and places prescribed by it, e.g. the animals hunted by hunting communities; the milk and flesh of pastoral tribes; the first fruits of cultivating peoples, and in general, fire, water, grass, among many primitive people.

14. The power which is thought to reside in these things, is the moral power of the society itself. The power is a real one and a great one, for it has the whole backing of the society behind it. The individual feels the society working on him through them, and it is through them that he is largely made to realise his dependence on the society, and so is made obedient to his (to its) ways and its modes of thought; especially the prohibitions regarding food connected with initiation and mourning; also the totemic ceremonies of hunting peoples
15. What is the function of initiation ceremonies? They are the means by which the society endows its members with an adult personality, with an adult's rights and duties in society, and so makes them realise what they owe to the society.
16. The bones of dead people, and of specially important animals in the life of the people, are often kept as sacred trophies of the society.

They are symbols of dangers overcome; they testify to the power of the society over the disintegrating power of death, and to the power to obtain food, and are a sign of protection in the past and protection in the future. That is why they are thought of as bringing good luck to the community where they are found, and that is why animal bones and animal teeth are thought of as protective amulets. They are filled with the power of the group. It is always the power of the group that gives value to the protective things used by the society. Always in the end, it is the moral force of the society itself which sustains all who participate in it. So, the cohesion of the society is maintained in healthy communities.

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