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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG.LECTURE XII.THE ORIGIN and DEVELOPMENT of GOVERNMENT  
AMONG PRIMITIVE PEOPLES.

- L.1. By "origin" in this connection we mean, not historical origin, which must always be speculative in the absence of records, but a study of the forces which are acting now, and have been acting in the past, in living societies to bring what we know as a government into being.
2. By a "government" we mean a determinate body (whether consisting of one, or few, or many individuals) whose commands the other members of the community are bound to obey.
3. Further, we generally think of a government as having legislative, administrative, and judicial powers, and the three departments may be administered by separate bodies of men.  
No such complicated organisation exists in primitive societies.
4. The first thing to remember is that the whole of social life among primitive peoples is controlled by customary law and tradition. Hence, even when we begin to get a government, its duty is to see that the traditional modes of behaving are maintained, rather than to create new precedents. It is only very late in the evolution of societies that we find men in authority, consciously initiating changes in the organisation of the State. In primitive societies as a rule, changes come almost imperceptibly, or else they come through individuals who claim to have been, and are acknowledged to have been in contact with the spiritual forces of the universe, as these are understood by the particular people, and to have received commands to do certain things, from them. Such individuals are little likely to suggest any changes which do not fit into the particular environment of the people to whom they belong. Changes due to contact of peoples borrowing from each other, etc., do not concern us in this connection.
5. The most primitive societies known to us are those of the primitive hunters. Among these people there is no organised government at all; there is no body of men or women having authority over the others. Such differences as occur between individuals, are purely individual differences, and are not organised in any way. Talent and skill, or wisdom, are quickly recognised and appreciated; so too, are age and experience, but no social organisation for government is based upon these differences, e.g. among the Eskimos, Andamanese, Bushmen, etc. In all such societies, all redress of wrongs is a purely individual affair.



Only in extreme cases of evil-doing does the whole community rise up to rid itself of the evil-doer. In such communities we see several forces, none of which are organised, acting to give human beings a control over their fellows. The chief of these forces are age and experience, special talent, special tact, or a special claim to contact with the spiritual powers of the universe. It is noticeable, further, that in these societies the advice of women is sought as readily as that of men.

6. In more developed societies we do not find that women play much part in the organised system of government. This may be due in many instances to historical accident, but it is also very largely due to the ritual dread attached to the involuntary shedding of human blood. To this women are liable through a large part of their lives, and they are, therefore, excluded from most public ceremonials of whatever kind. Old women in a great many communities, play a considerable part in the life of the people.

7. In the societies of more highly organised hunters, e.g. in Australia, we find totemic sibs and well-organised local groups. Here we find the old men organised into a camp-council recognised by the members of the community. Often there may be, in addition, one of the number recognised as headman of the local group, but his office is not hereditary. This Council discussed *death* depths by magic, (~~death, by magic, not depths~~), and sent out avenging parties; It punished incest, and got rid of people who were thoroughly bad. We see, then, a beginning of organised government and the punishment of certain crimes, such as incest, murder and witchcraft.

A still more organised system of government by elders can be studied among the Bantu Akamba, Akikuyu, and other East African tribes. Corresponding to this development in organisation, we find a development in the public control of crime.

This is one line of development from the primitive community with merely individual differences among its members.

8. Out of the same set of circumstances we can trace another line of development. For example, in British New Guinea we can study a gradual increase in the power wielded by one man over others.

Among the Massim, we find village communities with Sib structure. There are no sib chiefs, and no special war leaders. There are only certain "big men", as they are called, who may receive more deference and exert more authority than others. Their influence is purely personal.

Among the Koita, further west, we find each village divided into patrilineal sibs, each with its headman, and one of these headmen is usually recognised as headman of the village. The headship is limited to the members of one sib, usually the strongest sib, and traditionally the most important. We see here the beginning of a differentiation in the rank of the sibs, one standing out as a pre-eminent.

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Among the Roro-speaking tribes, still further west, we find each sib with its hereditary headman. The headman of the strongest sib has the right to stop fights between other sibs or even between villages. But there were other men who were war-chiefs, and others who had special knowledge in connection with the gardens, the making of rain etc.

9. In New Guinea, then, we begin to find one sib with its headman standing out above the others, but nowhere there do we find a number of sibs definitely organised into a tribe, with a recognised hereditary chief over them all. Among the people in Africa, we do find this further stage reached. Here we find a number of sibs united to form a tribe, e.g. among the Hottentots. One sib is definitely recognised as the leading one, and the chieftainship is hereditary in the eldest branch of this sib. Heads of other sibs are definitely relegated to the position of advisers. Among the Bantu we can study various types of tribal organisation, with more and more centralized government, until we get primitive nations, where a number of tribes are united under one government, and where authority comes from one centre, e.g. the Baganda, the Bakitara, the Banyankole and the Bushongo. But in these tribes and nations the chief is something more than first among his equals, as is the Hottentot chief for example; he is, more or less, a sacred person, and we must now study the influences that go to the making of these sacred chiefs or kings.
10. We have mentioned the influence of men who have special knowledge in any community, special courage in battle, special knowledge of the necessary ritual for ensuring the fertility of the herds and the crops and so on. A most important person in every community is the rainmaker, and very often, where he is found, the smith. We have seen further that these persons are thought to have their power through the concentration of mana in them, however got, and that persons with this concentration of sacred power, are themselves sacred, taboo. When, therefore, one manages to concentrate in his own person the chief source of the sacred powers which are supposed to maintain the society, he becomes an extremely sacred person, and an extremely powerful one. Where, in addition, he comes to be the head priest of his people, as it were, he holds in his own hands all the chief sources of power recognised by primitive peoples. The Bantu chief is, in this way, the chief priest of his people, but, in addition, most Bantu chiefs have other sources of spiritual power at their disposal. The Herero chief is guardian of the sacred fire of the tribe, and therefore, a most powerful person. The Thonga and other chiefs have the medicine upon which the whole prosperity (prosperity) depends. (the whole prosperity of the people). In some tribes it is precisely the man who has the secrets of obtaining spiritual power, who becomes chief. Hence, Fraser has argued that one of the chief factors in the development of the sacred king, is the possession of knowledge of how to draw upon the spiritual forces of the universe. We find instances of this among the Masai, the Nandi, and many other African peoples. Perhaps the extreme examples are to be found in Japan and China and in Ancient Egypt.



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Offences against the chief in these cases, practically never occur, for they would be offences against the sacred forces of the society.

In one way or another, we see in primitive societies, an organised body of men developing, whose duty it is to maintain the sentiments upon which the well-being of the Society depends. A gerontocracy, or body of elders, can fulfil this function by virtue of its superior experience and knowledge of tradition. A chief, or king, maintains these sentiments because he is believed to have power to utterly destroy those who disobey the traditions of his country. Where we find a combination of the chieftainship and a body of advisers chosen from the elders of the tribe, we have the possibility of a very powerful government, because it combines the prestige of the ruler, and the experience of the older man.

READING:-

Frazer, THE GOLDEN BOUGH - chapter on "The Evolution of the Sacred King".

Lowie, PRIMITIVE SOCIETY - chapter on "Government".

Special Books on Special Tribes.

**Collection Number: AD1715**

**SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974**

**PUBLISHER:**

*Collection Funder:- Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation*

*Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive*

*Location:- Johannesburg*

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