Tribe

DAVID SNEATH, *University of Cambridge*

The concept of 'tribal society' is one of the most prominent and popular 'anthropological' notions of our time, yet within western social and cultural anthropology it has been largely abandoned as a sociological category. Although the origin of the word was rooted in the ancient Roman tribus, *the modern concept of tribe emerged in the era of Euroamerican colonial expansion. It became the standard term for the social units of peoples considered primitive by the colonists, and for those thought to be uncivilised in historical accounts of antiquity. In the nineteenth century, the term tribe was woven into the theories of primitive society governed by the principles of 'kinship' proposed by the emerging social sciences, including the anthropology of Morgan and the sociology of Durkheim. This evolutionist thinking remained central to anthropology throughout most of the twentieth century, but in the post-colonial era of the discipline, more and more doubts were raised as to the usefulness of both the category 'tribe', and the particular models of kinship society that had been proposed for it. By the beginning of this century 'the tribe' had been widely discredited as an analytical term outside some specialised fields such as theories of early state formation. It is now commonly considered an ethnographic, rather than an analytical, term by Western-trained social and cultural anthropologists; a feature of the public culture studied, and reflecting the word's popularization and colonial heritage.*

Origins

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, 'tribal society' was widely thought to be the primary subject of anthropological inquiry. The study of 'modern' industrial society was the remit of sociology, while social and cultural anthropologists specialised in 'traditional', 'primitive', pre-industrial societies that formed 'tribes'.[1]

Paradoxically, although the concept of the tribe has been largely discredited and abandoned among Western-trained social and cultural anthropologists, the early anthropological promotion of the term was so successful that among the non-academic public worldwide, the category 'tribe' remains the single most prominent and dominant popular anthropological notion for imagining and referring to human society outside bureaucratic states.

The word 'tribe' itself is derived from the Latin term *tribus*, the administrative divisions and voting units of ancient Rome (Cornell 1995: 117).[2] It came to be used in biblical texts for the thirteen divisions of the early Israelites and appears with this meaning in Middle English in the thirteenth century. By the sixteenth century it was being applied to non-biblical contexts in ways that resembled concepts such as race and lineage (Murray 1926: 339).

The notion of the tribe took on a very particular role in the era of colonial expansion. It became the social unit – and characteristic life-organising social form – of peoples considered more primitive than the Euroamerican colonists. As Yapp remarks:

> It was only with the sixteenth-century expansion of Europe into the Americas and Africa that the association of tribes with a more primitive order of mankind began, and only with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century that this was formalized into that concept of progress which set tribal people outside the pale of civil society. It was then supposed that the natural course of human development was a progression to higher levels of social, economic and political organization, which could be equated with civilization; and that those people who remained grouped in tribes represented an earlier, lower form of life, left behind by the march of history and destined to be redeemed and refashioned by the intervention of superior forces. The epithet most commonly found in association with the word 'tribe' was 'savage' (1983: 154)*.

Tribe became the standard term for the political groups of those thought of as barbarians, both in colonial encounters and in historical accounts of antiquity. Early modern and Enlightenment accounts of ancient Roman history came to routinely apply the category of tribe to the societies of Gauls, Germans, and others considered barbaric by the classical authors (e.g., Gibbon 1790). But in fact, since the primary meaning of the Latin term *tribus* was a Roman administrative unit, the term 'tribe' that appeared in such modern translations and commentaries only rarely referred to what had actually been called *tribus* by ancient Romans themselves. When sources such as Caesar and Tacitus described Gauls and Germans, they commonly used other terms.[3] But European colonial elites compared themselves to the patricians of ancient Rome, and the same modern vocabulary for civilised and barbaric peoples was applied to both eras.

Tribe and evolutionism

In the nineteenth century, the emerging discipline of anthropology, dominated as it was by grand theories of historical progress and social evolution, wove the term tribe into the narrative of primitive society governed by the principles of 'kinship'. The most influential anthropological theorist of his generation, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) created a general scheme for the evolution of human society through three broad stages, from 'savagery,' to 'barbarism', and then to 'civilisation'. He based his scheme on his readings of classical Greek and Roman history, in particular the theory of ancient Hellenistic state formation proposed by liberal politician George Grote in his 1846–1856 history of Greece. In Morgan's schema the 'tribe' (the Greek *phylon*) was the political unit formed by a number of kinship units called *phratries* each composed of several 'clans' (*gens*) composed of families sharing descent from a common ancestor.

Morgan's scheme fitted into a broader evolutionist perspective that assumed primitive society was

organised by the principles of kinship and as a result could not be really hierarchical. Morgan, Maine, Marx, and McLennan all saw extended ties of kinship as forming the basis for pre-state society, later giving way to territory as the basis for social organization in civilizations. Maine, for example, who was concerned with the colonial administration of India and who grounded his work on primitive society in studies of classical Greek and particularly Roman sources, declared 'The history of political ideas begins, in fact, with the assumption that kinship in blood is the sole possible ground of community in political functions' (1861: 106). The progress from barbarism to civilization entailed the change in social organization from one based on egalitarian kinship to one structured by hierarchical and territorial administration. This theory of change became the frame in which the anthropological conception of tribe developed. As the unit of barbaric society, then, the tribe stood in contrast to the state.

Colonial rule powerfully institutionalised the term tribe as an administrative category throughout much of the colonised world, particularly in Africa. In British Africa, such tribes became indispensable features of indirect rule; local rulers were maintained, and sometime installed, as 'chiefs' of their respective 'tribes', under colonial oversight and regulation. 'Native law and custom' became a central category of administration and the unit to which it was attached was generally the tribe.[2] Only the most serious crimes were dealt with by the colonial judicial system; most local disputes were to be resolved by tribal courts using 'customary' law.

By the early twentieth century, the key assumptions regarding the tribe in evolutionist thought, that it was a form of primitive society, and that it was a kinship unit of common descent, had become common features in anthropological treatments. So, for example, the entry on 'Tribe' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1911 first describes the meaning of the word in terms of Roman administration and then continues: 'Its ethnological meaning has come to be any aggregate of families or small communities which are grouped together under one chief or leader, observing similar customs and social rules, and tracing their descent from one common ancestor.'[3] No serious attempt was made to establish a common definition, however, and many anthropologists tended to use tribe as a heuristic term to indicate some level of social aggregation of the 'primitive' societies they studied (Ekeh 1990: 662).[4]

However, the growing influence of Durkheimian theory in social anthropology added weight to the Morganian vision of kinship society. Durkheim, who had himself been a student of the celebrated classicist Fustel de Coulanges, also saw the tribe as 'an aggregate of hordes or clans' (Durkheim 2013 [1893]: 204) and built it into his account of social evolution from 'segmentary' society based upon mechanical solidarity to the more advanced societies based upon organic solidarity. The emergent vision of 'segmentary kinship society', made up of families grouped together into successively larger units on the grounds of shared descent, became widely accepted as a sort of natural form for primitive society.[5]

Tribe and social structure

In social anthropology the tribal concept was elaborated into a distinct model inspired, in particular, by Evans-Pritchard's account of Nuer social structure. In their seminal 1940 work *African political systems*, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard proposed two categories of African polities.

> One group, which we refer to as Group A, consists of those societies which have centralized authority, administrative machinery, and constituted judicial institutions – in short a government – and in which cleavages of wealth, privilege, and status correspond to the distribution of power and authority ... Group B consists of those societies which lack centralized authority, administrative machinery, and constituted judicial institutions – in short which lack government – and in which there are no sharp distinctions of rank, status, or wealth ... Those who consider that a state should be defined by the presence of governmental institutions will regard the first group as primitive states and the second group as stateless societies (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940: 5).

In these 'stateless societies', they argued, political relations were regulated by a 'segmentary lineage system' (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940: 6).[8] This segmentary system was proposed as a general model for non-state tribal societies in which the branching segments of a unilineal genealogy formed political and territorial units, composed of the descendants of common ancestors. These grouped together on the basis of their genealogical distance to create successively larger political units.[9] This typology was enormously influential and reflected the enduring influence of Morgan and evolutionist social theory.[10] Although crude evolutionism had been criticised by the previous generation of anthropologists such as Malinowski, Stocking notes that by 1951 the structural-functionalism presented in authoritative works such as *Notes and queries on anthropology* had 'in a peculiar way ... re-evolutionized' descriptions of political authority, so that they became ranged 'in implicit evolutionary fashion' (2001: 194).

Indeed, evolutionist thought remained central to both social and cultural anthropology and the tribe was widely thought of as an earlier stage of political evolution. As such the notion of 'tribal society' continued to act as the primitive counterpoint to self-descriptions of Euroamerican 'civilisation', narratives dominated by the discourse of class, kinship, territory, and function; and which reflected debates surrounding the 'state of nature' stretching back to Hobbes and Rousseau.

> Tribes occupy a position in cultural evolution. They took over from simpler hunters; they gave way to more advanced cultures we call civilisations ... the contrast between tribe and civilisation is between War and Peace. A civilisation is a society specially constituted to maintain 'law and order'; the social complexity and cultural richness of civilisations depend on institutional guarantees of Peace. Lacking these institutional means and guarantees, tribesmen live in a condition of War, and War limits the scale, complexity, and all-round richness of their culture ... Expressed another way,

in the language of older philosophy, the U.S. is a state, the tribe a state of nature. Or, the U.S. is a civilisation, the tribe a primitive society (Sahlins 1968: 4-5, original emphasis).

The death of the concept

However, the second half of the twentieth century saw a steadily growing disquiet with both the term 'tribal' and the thinking that informed it. There were a number of reasons for this. The first was the incoherence of the category of tribe as a sociological term and the persistent difficulties of devising a definition. The word was applied to social categories so radically different as to stretch any notion of common criteria to breaking point; from groups of a few hundred 'hunter-gatherers' like the Araweté of the Amazon (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 49) to the millions of people in Nigeria and Benin identified as Yoruba, with a long history of rival city states (Arnett 1933: 401).

The second reason was an unhappiness with early evolutionist social theory and the teleological judgements it implied. Theories of social evolution were increasingly seen to be triumphalist Euroamerican narratives that justified colonial domination and claims of superiority. The concept of 'primitive society', for example, was found to be increasingly inapplicable and unhelpful for the study of contemporary societies. But the theoretical inertia of concepts that had been central to so much anthropological literature meant that a common reaction to these critiques was to change the vocabulary but retain much of the content of the older terms. So in his 1968 entry on 'Tribal society' in the *International encyclopedia of the social sciences*, for example, I.M. Lewis acknowledges the 'unnecessary moralistic overtones' of the term 'tribe' and its association with 'a primitive or backward condition', but he argues that these can be 'avoided or minimized by the use of the expression "tribal society" which is to be preferred to such synonyms as "primitive society"' (1968: 146). This reflected the reluctance of many in the discipline to dispense with the established conceptual frame for ethnography.

In the post-colonial era, anthropologists became increasingly critical of the legacy of colonial ideology and its terminology. Historical examination quickly revealed the ways in which many 'tribes' had been constructed in the colonial era; often their names themselves were vague terms used by outsiders that later became institutionalised in administrative categories. As Southall notes with regard to the Nyamwezi and Sukuma 'tribes' of Tanganyika (Tanzania) and the Hausa of West Africa:

> 'Hausa' is not the proper name of this great conglomeration of medieval trading city-states, but just the Songhay term for 'those of the East'. Exploring the East African interior in the 1850s, Richard F. Burton found three great 'tribes' called Sukuma, Nyamwezi and Takama, unaware that his interpreters were giving him the terms for 'those to the North, West and South' of wherever they happened to be; Nyamwezi and Sukuma remain, but Takama has disappeared. (Southall 1985: 569)

However they came about, however, such tribes frequently gained administrative reality under colonial

rule. Ranger (1983), for example, takes John Iliffe's description of the creation of tribes in colonial Tanganyika as typical:

> The notion of the tribe lay at the heart of indirect rule in Tanganyika. Refining the racial thinking common in German times, administrators believed that every African belonged to a tribe, just as every European belonged to a nation. The idea doubtless owed much to the Old Testament, to Tacitus and Caesar, to academic distinctions between tribal societies based on status and modern societies based on contract, and to the post-war anthropologists who preferred 'tribal' to the more pejorative word 'savage'. Tribes were seen as cultural units 'possessing common language, a single social system, and an established common law'. Their political and social systems rested on kinship. Tribal membership was hereditary. Different tribes were related genealogically … As unusually well-informed officials knew, this stereotype bore little relation to Tanganyika's kaleidoscopic history, but it was the shifting sand on which Cameron and his disciples erected indirect rule by 'taking the tribal unit'. They had the power and they created the political geography (Ranger 1983: 250).

Critical discussion of the tribe as an analytical concept began to emerge with increasing force in the 1960s. Treatments by Fried (1966) and Southall (1970) undermined the notion of the tribe as a pre-state stage in social evolution and pointed to the incoherence of the concept. But the term was too well established to be quickly abandoned.

As it had been widely thought of as a pre-state type of political organization, the notion of tribal society was still widely seen as applicable to polities that structural-functionalist treatments had characterised as less hierarchical, less centralised and smaller in scale than 'the state'. The problem with this position was, however, that many of the best known 'tribes', such as the Zulu and Yoruba, had large-scale, hierarchical, and powerful polities that resembled the entities called 'states' rather closely. The solution was the use of the term 'chiefdom' as a sort of 'missing link' between the state and its tribal ancestor. This was done most explicitly by evolutionist anthropologists such as Sahlins and Service.[11] This thinking has remained surprisingly influential among those working on state formation in cultural anthropology and archaeology (see, e.g., Carneiro 2003; Cobb 2003; Earle 1991). But, rooted as it is in the same colonial history and primitivist theory as the tribe, the term 'chiefdom' is open to many of the same critiques.

The notion of the tribe in contradistinction to the state became increasingly problematic among anthropologists concerned with contemporary societies, partly because the characterization proposed could not be made to match the use of the term 'tribe' in general use. The essential distinction between tribe and state had never been entirely accepted within the discipline. Malinowski, for example, saw the two as compatible and used the term 'tribe-state' to describe the Trobriands (Malinowski 1944: 166).[12]

By the 1980s it had become increasingly clear that, because the use of the word tribe was the result of

colonial logic, it only reliably indicated people not considered fully civilised in that era. Elizabeth Colson notes the double standards of this 'tribalizing' discourse.

> In terms of territory, population, wealth, bureaucratic development, social stratification, and the centralization of power, the Hausa state of Kano far surpassed many of the kingdoms of Medieval Europe. Yet most of those who referred to the Hausa as a tribe were not being facetious in the fashion of Weatherford when he wrote of the tribes of Washington … Too many social scientists, as well as the general public, use [tribe] to maintain a false distinction between us and them, those people who used to be called primitive because they did not originate within the European tradition. Tribe, then, signals something about political domination but says nothing about the social complexity or political organization, now or formerly, of those to whom it is applied who may or may not have formed a polity in the past or present. In the 17th century when English-speaking explorers and settlers dealt with Native Americans as politically independent societies, they commonly referred to them as nations, placing them thus on a par with European nations … As it became possible to ignore and inexpedient to recognize the full sovereignty of Native American rivals with whom the English settlements competed for land and political dominion, 'nation' gave way to 'tribe' which carried implications of lesser political status. Tribe thereafter became the term commonly used to distinguish among the populations being incorporated into colonial empires as these were created during the 19th century (Colson 1986: 5-6).

The other notion that had been attached to the tribe, that it was a group sharing descent from a common ancestor, proved equally problematic. Firstly, many ethnographers had failed to find an ideology of shared descent among the people they studied. In his ethnography of the Andaman Islanders, for example, Radcliffe-Brown noted 'the tribe is fundamentally a linguistic group' rather than a kinship unit, and describes it as 'of very little importance in regulating the social life' (1922: 23). Furthermore, such 'tribes' did not resemble Morganian kinship society because '[i]n the Andamans there are no clans' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 53). Interestingly, however, Radcliffe-Brown assumed that the Andamans were exceptional in this regard and that something like Morgan's kinship organization must exist among 'the vast majority of primitive peoples' (1922: 52).[13] Only later did generations of scholars begin to doubt the apparently authoritative theories of kinship society.

However, even Evans-Pritchard's own account of Nuer society failed to match the notion of a group defined strictly by common descent, as 'persons of Dinka descent form probably at least half the population of most tribes' (1940: 221). So the kinship-society model survived by recasting its central feature; rather than *actual* common descent, the members of these societies used the *idiom* of common descent to describe political relations. Although the segmentary lineage structure Evans-Pritchard described for the Nuer only strictly speaking applied to a small minority,[14] it could still be seen as the central principle of social

organization as all members of the society were attached to members of the dominant lineages, and so, the argument went, were part of a system of common kinship and descent in some sense.

If the structural-functionalists' loosely Weberian political typologies had internalised the colonial notion of tribe as a political segment, Marxian evolutionary perspectives were rooted in the Morganian vision of tribal kinship society. Gluckman, for example, dismissed what he termed the 'crude kind of social evolutionism' (1965: 84) of the previous generation of scholars, but described the Marxian evolutionism of Leslie White and others in positive tones, based as it was on 'far better data on the tribal peoples' (1965: 84). Although aware of ethnography that contradicted the nineteenth century evolutionary narrative, Gluckman nevertheless retained the old paradigm, assuming that it was sound ideologically, if not literally. So when Schapera's ethnography showed that hunter-gatherer bands were not kinship groups, thus contradicting Maine's theory that in primitive society 'kinship in blood is the sole possible ground for community in political functions' (1861: 106), Gluckman defends the theorist rather than the ethnographer; stressing that the insights from Ancient Greece remained valid. He writes:

> Maine's statement is undoubtedly misleading. But he makes it clear elsewhere in the book that in classical Greece 'strangers' could join a political state ... The alteration [from tribe to state] comes when a kinship idiom to express political association is no longer demanded: as we have already seen, the kinship idiom of tribal society in practice covers relationships directed towards various purposes (Gluckman 1965: 86).

In retrospect, however, the existence of kinship idioms that can be applied to political relations seems an unconvincing basis for a distinctive social type. Three major world religions claim universal descent from Adam and all sorts of political and religious institutions use kinship idioms for their members, including nation-states (Hobsbawm 1990: 53-4). The critique of the old tribal paradigm continued to gather pace. Fried's (1975) monograph *The notion of tribe* argued that the model of pre-state tribal society was entirely fallacious and that the entities called tribes were constructed by states. Godelier saw the concept of tribe as a product of the wider problems of outdated theories of kinship society and called for a more thoroughgoing rethinking of the paradigm:

> It is not enough, like Swartz or Turner, to ignore the concept of tribe by referring no longer to it; to appeal to prudence, like Steward; or to criticise its scandalous imprecision (Neiva), its theoretical sterility and fallacies (Fried) its ideological manipulation as a tool in the hands of colonial powers (Colson, Southall, Valakazi). The evil does not spring from an isolated concept but has roots in a problem which will necessarily produce similar theoretical effects as dictated by the scientific work put into it (Godelier 1977: 90).[15]

In the 1980s classical kinship theory as a whole began to unravel in the face of critiques led by Schneider

(1984), who pointed to the distorting effects of treating kinship as a privileged analytical category, and Kuper (1988) who explored the pervasive influence of primitivism in anthropology. Parts of the Morganian scheme had been in doubt for some time. The ethnographic evidence for the segmentary kinship model had always been rather slight, and this began to fade away in the light of more critical later studies (Gough 1971; Southall 1988; Verdon 1983). As Kuper pointed out, the actual local categories used to designate groups of people did not resemble those of descent theory (1988: 190-209; also see Gottlieb 1992: 46-71; Jackson 1989: 10-1). As he concludes, 'there do not appear to be any societies in which vital political or economic activities are organized by a repetitive series of descent groups' (Kuper 2004: 93). The structure that had been thought to typify 'tribal society' appears to have been a mirage.

In the mid-1980s Aidan Southall noted that 'few Anglo-Saxon anthropologists with relevant field experience have defended the concept of tribe in the last twenty-five years' (1985: 568). Works such as Vail's *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa* (1989) helped establish the view that tribalism was a product of colonial classification and administration, and should be approached as an ideological construct dating from that era.

Survival beyond anthropology

But outside of anthropology the term tribe continued to be widely used. In history, particularly that of the Middle East, the concept lived on in something like its original Morganian form.[16] So Khoury and Kostiner write that 'as ideal types, tribes represent large kin groups organized and regulated according to ties of blood or family lineage; states, by contrast, are structures that exercise the ultimate monopoly of power in a given territory' (1990: 4). Noting that this distinction was generally far from clear in practice, they make use of another old anthropological concept to bridge the gap – the chiefdom. 'Chiefdoms may be viewed as one type of intermediate political formation between tribes and states, incorporating some features and institutions of both' (Khoury & Kostiner 1990: 8). However, even Khoury and Kostiner follow Tapper in conceding that some 'tribes' never subscribed to the ideology of common descent, and they admit that a definition of tribe is 'virtually impossible to produce' (1990: 5). It was not just the kinship content of the unit that was problematic; it could not be treated as an essentially non-state form since 'there are elements of state within every tribe and of tribe within every state' (Tapper 1990: 68).

Since that time most anthropologists have moved further away from the notion of tribal society, even as the sort of abstract conceptual model or ideal-type that Tapper and Khoury and Kostiner were left with. Aidan Southall, in his 1996 entry 'Tribe' in the *Encyclopedia of cultural anthropology*, wrote: 'Tribe is a self-fulfilling Orientalist prophesy in which vague notions of outsiders are essentialized' (1996: 1331). 'Heroic attempts are made at salvaging and sanitizing the concept', he adds, but in the end the term 'has little precise meaning and so many different divergent definitions that a realistic conclusion would be … to

accept the use of a term like 'people', which matches the indeterminacy of the phenomenon itself' (Southall 1996: 1334-5).

The tribe, however, continues to survive. In some strands of evolutionist cultural anthropology, less concerned perhaps with the legacy of colonialism, the concept of the tribe has been retained with all the characteristics expected of it by evolutionist kinship theory. In his *Dictionary of concepts in cultural anthropology*, Winthrop, for example, defines 'tribe' in the following way: 'A culturally homogenous, nonstratified society possessing a common territory, without centralized political or legal institutions, whose members are linked by extended kinship ties, ritual obligations, and mutual responsibility for the resolution of disputes' (1991: 307). In a similar way, John H. Bodley's textbook *Cultural anthropology: tribes, states, and the global system*, reprinted for the fifth time in 2011, divides all known societies into three categories of increasing complexity: tribal, imperial, and commercial 'worlds'. Of the tribal he writes:

> Most of human existence has been in the tribal world. With small societies living in an uncrowded world and a minimum of social inequality except for natural differences of age and gender, tribal people could enjoy a maximum of human freedom … there was no need for government … Everyone shared natural resources and the goods that they produced, while at the same time maintaining clear property rights (Bodley 2011: 1).

This theoretically possible, but entirely speculative, vision of the distant past exemplifies the longevity of the mythology of primitive society so thoroughly critiqued by Kuper (1988).

Despite its survival in some schools of thought, however, the tribe has become a term of largely historical interest within most of social and cultural anthropology, seen as an artefact of older theories.[17] In his 1996 article 'Tribe' in *The social sciences encyclopedia*, John Sharp, for example, writes a suitable memorial to the heyday of the tribe as an analytical concept:

> Early ethnographers … speculated that 'primitive' groups were recruited by ascription, on the basis of status. Evidence that kinship played some part in constituting these social groups led them to conclude that tribes were ascriptive groups based solely on kinship. This was patently untrue, but it allowed people in the west to believe that primitive and civilized worlds were fundamentally different (Sharp 1996: 883).

References

Arnett, E. 1933. The census of Nigeria, 1931. *Journal of the Royal African Society* **32**, 398-404.

Bodley, J.H. 2011. *Cultural anthropology: tribes, states, and the global system*. Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press.

Carneiro, R. 2003. *Evolutionism in cultural anthropology: a critical history.* Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.

Cobb, C. 2003. Mississippian chiefdoms: how complex? *Annual Review of Anthropology* **32**, 63-84.

Colson, E. 1986. Political organization in tribal societies: a cross-cultural comparison. *American Indian Quarterly* **10**, 5-19.

Cornell, T. 1995. *The beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars*. London & New York: Routledge.

Durkheim, E. 2013 [1893]. *The division of labour in society.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Earle, T. (ed.) 1991. *Chiefdoms: power, economy, and ideology*. Cambridge: University Press.

Ekeh, P. 1990. Social anthropology and two contrasting uses of tribalism in Africa. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* **32**, 660-700.

Evans-Pritchard, E. 1940. *The Nuer: a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Niliotic people*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——— 1951. *Social anthropology.* London: Cohen & West.

Fortes, M. & E. Evans-Pritchard (eds) 1940. *African political systems*. Oxford: University Press.

Fried, M. 1966. On the concepts of 'tribe' and 'tribal society'. *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* **28**, 527-40.

——— 1975. *The notion of tribe*. Menlo Park, Calif.: Cummings.

Gibbon, E. 1790. *Mr. Gibbon's History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, abridged*. London: Strahan & Cadell.

Gluckman, M. 1965. *Politics, law and ritual in tribal society*. Chicago: Aldine.

Godelier, M. 1977. *Perspectives in Marxist anthropology*. Cambridge: University Press.

Gottlieb, A. 1992. *Under the Kapok tree: identity and difference in Beng thought*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Gough, K. 1971. Nuer kinship: a reexamination. In *The translation of culture: essays to E.E. Evans-Pritchard* (ed.) T. Beidelman. London: Tavistock.

Hobsbawm, E.J. 1990. *Nations and nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge: University Press.

Howell, P.P. 1954. *A manual of Nuer law*. Oxford: University Press.

Jackson, M. 1989. *Paths toward a clearing: radical empiricism and ethnographical inquiry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Khoury, P. & J. Kostiner 1990. Introduction: tribes and the complexities of and state formation in the Middle East. In *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East* (eds) P. Khoury & J. Kostiner, 1-22. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kuper, A. 1988. *The invention of primitive society: transformations of an illusion*. London & New York: Routledge.

——— 2004. Lineage theory: a critical retrospect. In *Kinship and family: an anthropological reader* (eds) R. Parkin & L. Stone, 79-96. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

Lewin, J. 1938. The recognition of native law and custom in British Africa. *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* **20**, 16-23.

Lewis, I.M. 1968. Tribal society. In *The international encyclopedia of the social sciences* **16**, 146-51. Farmington Hills, Mich.: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press.

Malinowski, B. 1932 [1922]. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: an account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: George Routledge & Sons.

——— 1944. *A scientific theory of culture and other essays*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.

MacMichael, H.A. 1910. The Kababish: some remarks on the ethnology of a Sudan Arab tribe. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* **40**, 215-31.

Maine, H. 1861. *Ancient law: its connection with the early history of society and its relation to modern ideas*. London: John Murray.

Morgan, L.H. 1964 [1877]. *Ancient society: researches in the lines of human progress from savagery through barbarism to civilisation*. New York: Holt.

Murray, J. 1926. *A new English dictionary on historical principles: founded mainly on the materials collected by the Philological Society* **10**(1). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Paul, J. 2011. Mongol aristocrats and beyliks in Anatolia: a study of Astarabadi's *Bazm va Razm*. *Eurasian Studies* **9**, 103-56.

Peacock, A. 2013. From the Balkhan-Kuhiyan to the Nawakiya: nomadic polities and the foundations of

Seljuk rule in Anatolia. In *Nomad aristocrats in a world of empires* (ed.) J. Paul, 55-80. Wiesbaden: Verlag.

Radcliffe-Brown, A. 1922. *The Andaman islanders; a study in social anthropology*. Cambridge: University Press.

——— 1952. *Structure and function in primitive societies*. London: Cohen & West.

Ranger, T. 1983. The invention of tradition in Colonial Africa. In *The invention of tradition* (eds) E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, 211-62. Cambridge: University Press.

Rives, J. 1999. *Tacitus: Germania*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sahlins, M. 1968. *Tribesmen*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Schneider, D. 1984. *A critique of the study of kinship*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Sharp, J. 1996. Tribe. In *The social sciences encyclopedia, second edition* (eds) A. Kuper & J. Kuper. London & New York: Routledge.

Smith, C.J. 2006. *The Roman clan: the gens from ancient ideology to modern anthropology*. Cambridge: University Press.

Sneath, D. 2007. *The headless state: aristocratic orders, kinship society, and misrepresentations of Inner Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Southall, A. 1970. The illusion of the tribe. In *The passing of tribal man in Africa* (ed.) P. Gutkind, 28-50. Leiden: Brill.

——— 1985. Review: The ethnic heart of anthropology (Le cœur ethnique de l'anthropologie). *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* **25**, 567-72.

——— 1988. The segmentary state in Africa and Asia. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* **30**, 52-82.

——— 1996. Tribe. In *Encyclopedia of cultural anthropology* (eds) D. Levinson & M. Ember, 1329-36. New York: Henry Holt.

Stocking, G. 2001. *Delimiting anthropology: occasional essays and reflections*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Tapper, R. 1990. Anthropologists, historians, and tribespeople on tribe and state formation in the Middle East. In *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East* (eds) P. Khoury & J. Kostiner, 48-73. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Vail, L. 1989. *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Verdon, M. 1983. *The Abutia Ewe of West Africa: a chiefdom that never was*. Berlin: Mouton.

Viveiros de Castro, E. 1992. *From the enemy's point of view: humanity and divinity in an Amazonian society*. Chicago: University Press.

Winthrop, R. 1991. *Dictionary of concepts in cultural anthropology*. New York: Greenwood Press.

Wolfram, H. 1988. *History of the Goths*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yapp, M. 1983. Tribes and states in the Khyber 1838–42. In *The conflict of tribe and state in Iran and Afghanistan* (ed.) R. Tapper. London: Croom Helm.

Note on contributor

Dr. David Sneath is Reader in the Anthropology of Political Economy at the Division of Social Anthropology and Director of the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, Cambridge University. He is an editor of the Brill journal *Inner Asia* and a Fellow at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

Dr David Sneath, Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Division of Social Anthropology, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RF, United Kingdom. ds114@cam.ac.uk

---

[1] Evans-Pritchard, for example, writes 'Social Anthropology can therefore be regarded as a branch of sociological studies, that branch which chiefly devotes itself to primitive societies' (1951: 11), and Radcliffe-Brown describes the subject as 'the study of what are called primitive or backward peoples' (1952: 2).

[2] As Cornell notes, there is no evidence that Roman tribes were kinship units (1995: 116). They were 'artificial units deliberately instituted for administrative and political purposes' (Cornell 1995: 117).

[3] Gauls and Germans were commonly described using the terms *civitas* ('state'), *natio* ('nation', 'race', 'people') and *gens* – the term translated as 'clan' by Morgan but that has been subject to debate and its precise meaning remains unclear (Rives 1999: 119-53; Smith 2006: 1-14; Wolfram 1988: 6).

[4] See, for example, Lewin (1938).

[5] See *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911, Vol. 27: 262). It is worth noting that the entry describes the 'ethnological meaning' of the term separately because, as an administrative unit, the original Roman tribe bore little resemblance to the understanding of the term used by anthropologists or colonial administrators.

[6] See, for example, MacMichael, who wrote '[t]he word tribe as commonly used generally implies among other things a closely homogeneous collection of families or individuals living together under a hereditary or elective sheikhship, and largely distinct by race from other such communities' (1910: 215).

[7] Morgan described these kinship structures and their units as natural phenomena (1964 [1877]: 302-4).

[8] See Kuper for a discussion of these models (1988: 190-209). See also Sneath (2007: 40-9, 132-4).

[9] In his textbook *Tribesmen*, for example, Sahlins wrote: 'The tribe presents itself as a pyramid of social groups, technically speaking as a "segmentary hierarchy" ... The smallest units, such as households, are segments of more inclusive units such as lineages, the lineages in turn segments of larger groups, and so on' (1968: 15).

[10] The Group A and Group B distinctions are reminiscent of Morgan's position that 'all forms of government are reducible to two general plans ... The first, in the order of time, is founded upon persons, and upon relations purely personal, and may be distinguished as a society (*societas*). The gens [clan] is the unit of organisation ... The second is founded upon territory and upon property, and may be distinguished as a state (*civitas*)' (Morgan 1964 [1877]: 13-14).

[11] Sahlins writes '[t]ribes present a notable range of evolutionary developments … in its most developed expression, the chiefdom, tribal culture anticipates statehood in its complexities. Here are regional political regimes organised under powerful chiefs and primitive nobilities' (1968: 20). The distinguishing feature of 'primitive nobilities' was, needless to say, the circular notion that they existed in chiefdoms or 'primitive states'. As an evolutionist concept, the chiefdom had to conform with the theory of change from egalitarian kinship society towards impersonal class society. It was said to be made up of descent groups that were simultaneously communities, and therefore could not be *fully* stratified, as that was thought to be a characteristic of a later stage.

[12] He described the Trobriands as having a 'tribe-state', which he thought of as the 'executive committee' of the wider society, with political organisation, a military class, and arms as instruments of power (Malinowski 1944: 166).

[13] Even in cases where ethnographers described the descent groups they encountered as clans, they might not share a common ancestor. The Trobriand *kumila* 'clans' and *dala* 'sub-clans' described by Malinowski, for example, each had different female ancestors. See Malinowski (1932 [1922]: 63).

[14] As Howell explains, '[w]ithin each tribe only a small proportion of the people has the genuine right to claim direct descent from the original ancestor from whom the tribal name is derived. The majority are descended from later immigrants from other parts of Nuerland, or from Dinka accretions absorbed by the fiction of adoption into Nuer society. Genuine descendants are termed *diel*' (1954: 18). Evans-Pritchard notes: '[t]he *diel* are an aristocratic clan, numerically swamped in the tribe by strangers and Dinka, but providing a lineage structure on which the tribal organization is built up' (1940: 220).

[15] He adds '[t]he most surprising thing in the history of this concept is that it has varied little in basic meaning since Lewis H. Morgan (1877). The innumerable discoveries in the field since have only aggravated and accentuated the imprecision and difficulties without leading to any radical critique, still less to its expulsion from the field of anthropology' (Godelier 1977: 89-90).

[16] More recent scholarship, however, has questioned the evidential basis for the application of the tribal model to historical societies in Anatolia, for example (Paul 2011; Peacock 2013).

[17] As Gingrich writes in his 2001 entry on 'Tribe' in the *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences*, '[m]ost scholars … would agree that the concept [of tribe] is obsolete as a general comparative category outside particular areas' (Gingrich 2001: 15908).