Note

Government of Australian Aboriginal Society

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1. Introduction

When we consider the government of Aboriginal society, as a matter of course we should not consider it as a political system like that of modern society, in which, generally, there are people who are selected as administrative experts on the basis of technical qualifications; as such this is bureaucratic. In a bureaucratic system, there are those who are tested by examination, guaranteed by diplomas certifying technical training, then remunerated by fixed salaries, normally in the form of money. This means they are in a position in which they do not engage in any physically productive activity, but rather devote themselves to administration, through which they are vested a certain legitimate authority within the society. Whether there were such administrative experts in Aboriginal society or not is a question of the way they engaged in their productive activities. That is to say, it depends on whether they could get enough food to provide for those who did not engage in productive activities.

2. The background of Aboriginal society

In order to describe the government of Aboriginal society, it is necessary to consider the background of Aboriginal society. It is said that when Europeans first settled in Australia there were between 250,000 and 500,000 aborigines
already in occupation\(^1\)). This was a population of at the most 2 people per square mile even if this was the greatest density of population. At that time, their economies, that is, productive activities were directly exploitative of nature, that is gathering and hunting. This means that their society itself was not sedentary, but mobile.

It is still a mystery why they did not engage in agriculture, but as a result they have not settled in a certain place and, whatever the range of mobility, they were mobile groups. As M. J. Meggitt says\(^2\), such sparseness of population and mobility of groups were significant factors in the form that Aboriginal government took. Sparseness of population meant that it was difficult for them to become a strongly united group or society, or to contact more or less united small groups. This meant that because of the weakness of unity it was difficult to create powerful authority to control each group. Mobility of groups meant that it was difficult to establish stable systems or institutions. That is, we can therefore wonder how such groups as depend on an all-out natural economy as well as being mobile could get enough food to provide for a certain number of members who did not engage in any productive activity. It could be done because, unlike agriculture, any planned production of food cannot be expected in gathering or hunting. Therefore, according to their needs, they must have had to muster as many people as possible to do that. From the above-mentioned, it may be supposed that there was no room for someone as a bureaucrat to appear, who did not engage in any productive activity, but simply held certain authority and exercised it.

3. The definition of government

When we say government, it is necessary to define what government really means. R. M. Berndt says, “Government
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is to think about how the peace is maintained and how interpersonal conflict is kept sufficiently in check\(^{(9)}\)." Or Meggitt says, "By government I mean the ways in which a group or association of people runs its affairs\(^{(4)}\)." I will use both of these definitions.

The first question is, what is a range of people or a group within a government? That is to say, how were they united as a group to form a government? Radcliffe-Brown stated that throughout Australia the political unit was the horde. His term "horde" means male members of all ages whose fathers and fathers' fathers belonged to the horde, unmarried girls who are the sisters or daughters or son's daughters of the male members and married women, all of whom, in some regions, and most of whom, in others, belonged originally to other hordes\(^{(5)}\). In other words, the male and unmarried female members of the patrilineal descent group and wives of the male members. However, subsequent first-hand research opposed his statement. That is to say, a large group including a few patrilineal groups was supposed to be a political unit. For example, Meggitt says, "The four localized communities that made up the tribe were the largest group with political and administrative functions\(^{(6)}\)." and he also says, "Full and effective membership of a local community, like full tribal membership, seems in most cases to have depended primarily on birth (or conception) in the appropriate territory\(^{(7)}\)." Or L. R. Hiatt says, "Among the Gidjingali\(^{(8)}\) the political unit (if it can be so called) was also the community of people who regularly lived together. But this comprised the male members of not one, but from four to six land owning units (four to eleven patrilineal groups)\(^{(9)}\)."

Of course, each community was not united as one stable group. That is to say, the community itself including a few patrilineal groups was divided into a few groups according to
circumstances. Meggitt says, "On some occasions the communities functioned as the largest economic units, but more often they broke up into a number of smaller food gathering units." Nevertheless, the reason the community is a political unit is that, for example, members of the community regularly lived together. Each group in a community was linked by ties of friendship, marriage and ritual obligation and possessed the same laws and also each group could move freely within the same territory.

4. Leadership and authority

The next question is whether a community as a political unit had a political leader. A. P. Elkin says, "Each local group has its headman, usually the oldest man, provided that he be not too old to take full interest in its affairs, and the headmen of the various groups of tribes constitute a council which talks over matters of common interest and make decisions." All the researchers found the existence of a person who had leadership in a certain field, especially in a ritual field.

The Aborigines' view of the universe relates to the continuation and harmony of the Dreamtime beyond conception of time and space. They have tried to realize the Dreamtime through ritual ceremonies, therefore, those who had a lot of knowledge concerning rituals acquired leadership in order to conduct the ceremonies correctly. It is natural that they were older rather than younger. They were thus called "elders". Elkin also says, "The male elders are those who exercise authority in the local groups, and at meetings of such groups." However, not all the members acquired leadership with age especially in the ritual field. It depended on their knowledge of rituals and those elders were not always old men, they were rather middle-aged who must have been from
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our standpoint reasonably aware in mind and body. Besides those elders there were those who had a certain prestige in Aboriginal society. They were so-called medicine men or clever men. Meggitt says, "The medicine men or clever fellows (of whom there could rarely have been more than four or five to a community) often possessed a degree of prestige within the community's boundaries and occasionally beyond them. In other respects, however, the medicine man was hardly to be distinguished from his countrymen." "Countrymen" here means members of the community.

Leadership by elders generally was exhibited in the ritual field, but it is doubtful that their leadership was also valid in daily life. But, Elkin says, "There is usually one headman for each group who unofficially presides at meetings, settles quarrels and makes decisions bearing on the group's economic, social and ceremonial activities, though other elders also express their opinions." This means that to some degree leadership was as a political power in daily life.

In a totemic society like the Aboriginal's, authority was diffused (not centralized) among all the memmbers. Nomadic groups like Aborigines are generally based upon kinship. For centralizing or individualizing authority, the clan has to get out of a diffused situation, and the clan has to change into a single and sedentary territorial group and then those who have a certain authority or absolute power in their hands are obvious in the society. Certainly, a community within Aboriginal society was a sort of territorial group, that is, they were a certain land owning group, but, as Berndt says, Aboriginal society is kinbased. Therefore, many researchers stated that such strong authority did not exist in their daily life. Berndt says, "In Aboriginal Australia, centralized authority is almost non-existent." Or Meggitt says, "No matter how much authority people conceded to a ritual leader
in the sacred sphere, it did not as a rule extend at all into secular affairs, even within the confines of his own local community."

5. How to solve conflicts

To what extent such authority existed in daily life poses the question of how the society was controlled in daily life. According to the classification of modern law, social control has two aspects, one aspect is that a breach brings a certain punishment straight away and the other is the rules of conduct in daily life. In this case, failure of obligation in daily life does not directly bring physical punishment. Normally, in modern society these aspects are covered by criminal and civil law. But, in Aboriginal society such distinction was not recognized, because there was no separation of public and private life or things in their daily life. Social conflict in Aboriginal society which brings punitive sanction may be divided into two types, that is, conflict within the same community, and conflict between communities. Regarding conflict within the community, there was always intervention. In some cases, it was from bystanders, in other cases, it was from relatives of the parties concerned. Berndt says, "Quarreling tends to be socially contagious: firstly, because of the intermeshing ties of kinship, and secondly, because privacy is at a minimum and all disagreements are public property — and are therefore open to interference. He also says, "the pull of kin is significant in all social affairs. Any accusation against or by person inevitably involves others."

The method of solving such conflicts between communities was not always intervention by authority. For example, concerning conflict between communities, Meggitt says, "despite the frequency of displays of violence within and between Aboriginal groups, the societies were not militaristic,
there was no glorification of warfare, there were no permanent classes or groups of full-time fighting men and there was no hierarchy of military command." He also says, "there were rarely any actual military leaders, elected or hereditary, to plan strategy or to direct tactics." As an example of this kind of battle, W. L. Warner says, "there were killings caused by looking at a totem emblem under improper circumstances or killings following the stealing of a woman from another group, etc." But, it is not clear what kind of authority intervened in this kind of battle. Moreover, to punish members of a community, the so-called law was applied to them, but the application of their law tended to stop short at the tribal borders of their territory. Meggitt exhibits an example that there is no penalty for the Walbiri who kills a member of another tribe, who cuckold a non-Walbiri or abducts his wife.

Finally, concerning social conflicts, Elkin and Berndt say the following about the existence of the council or the court. Elkin stated that the headmen of the various groups of a tribe constitute a council. According to Berndt, the principal headman had his own council. All positions on the council were elective. Not only middle-aged and elderly but also younger men were eligible; and all adults, women as well as men, were permitted to participate. In some cases women took a leading part, but they were not usually elected to the council. It is not clear to what extent the headmen’s authority in a council existed, but considering that unsatisfactory headmen could be deposed, their authority was not absolute, but relative. Concerning rules of conduct in their daily life, generally they knew their roles within the group or the society, therefore, they did not necessarily act under a certain authority.

To aborigines, customs or traditions themselves were the
source of rules of conduct in their daily life. For example, Meggitt says, "the significance of the stimulus to action was at once clear to the members of the community, for they had been taught from early age to recognize it. In addition they had learned what to do about the event, what rules should be in the subsequent reaction to it(27)."

6. Conclusion

In Aboriginal society there was no institution of authority, or rather centralized authority was almost non-existent, but there is a controversy concerning such authority as was found in a smaller group. Elkin and Berndt insist on the existence of a certain authority in Aboriginal society, which was not absolute, but relative, through the operation of a council or a court which, being primitive, was presided over by headmen. While, Meggitt and Hiatt state that although leadership existed, it was only in a certain field, especially in a ritual field, and that it was only prestige, rather than authority in their daily life. There is also another controversy. Concerning a political unit, against the insistence by Radcliffe-Brown that a horde is a political unit, Elkin, Meggitt or Hiatt insist that a local group as a political unit was made up of the members of a few patriclans, that is, a community. Aboriginal society is so complicated that there are still many questions left unanswered. The most important and difficult task is to answer the question of what is the concept of a Aboriginal tribe related to communities including a few patriclans, and how a tribal territory is related to a community’s territory.

Notes:


(2) M. J. Meggitt, "Indigenous forms of government among the Aus-


(8) One tribe's name of Australian Aborigines in northern Australia.


(10) Meggitt, op. cit., p. 69.


(12) Dreamtime is the mythical time of the genesis of Australian Aborigines.

(13) Elkin, op. cit., p. 114.

(14) Meggitt, op. cit., p. 249.

(15) Elkin, op. cit., p. 114.


(21) Meggitt, "Indigenous forms", p. 70.

(22) Meggitt, ibid., p. 71.


(26) Berndt, op. cit., p. 177.

(27) Meggitt, "Indigenous forms", p. 70.