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**ECONOMICS
IN PRIMITIVE
COMMUNITIES**

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By

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CONTENTS

NOTES ON TERMS EMPLOYED	vii
INTRODUCTION	ix
PART I. CONDITIONS OF PRIMITIVE ECONOMICS	
I. General Considerations: The Problems of Progress and Development	3
II. Population and its means of increase	15
III. The Food Question	16
IV. Settlements	22
v. Technical Skill	33
PART II. TYPES OF ECONOMIC LIFE	
I. Homogeneous Communities of Man as Hunters and Trappers, Women as Collectors	59
II. Homogeneous Communities of Hunters, Trappers, and Agriculturists	63
III. Graded Society of Hunters, Trappers, Agriculturists, and Artisans	66
IV. The Herdsmen	73
v. Homogeneous Hunters and Herdsmen	76
VI. Ethnically Stratified Cattle-breeders and Traders	79
VII. Socially Graded Herdsmen with Hunting, Agricultural, and Artisan Population	85
VIII. Feudal States and Socially Graded Communities	93
IX. The Development of the 'Familia' and the 'Manor'	99
PART III. FORMS OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY	
I. General Traits	105
II. Handicraft	113
III. Handicraft (<i>continued</i>)	117
IV. Wages	136
v. Barter	141
VI. Trade	145
VII. The Market	159
VIII. Purchase	171
IX. Distribution of Goods and Wealth	175
X. Ownership and Property	186

CONTENTS

xI. Feudalism	195
xII. Family Capitalism	205
xIII. Work	209
xIV. Slavery	217
xv. Bondmen	243
xvi. Symbols of Value and Money	252
xvII. Partnership and Collectivism	266
xvIII. Principles of Primitive Economics	275
xix. The Spirit of Primitive Economics	281
Diagrams: illustrating the Development of Economic Methods and Simple Technical Skill	289
Bibliography	299
Index	311

NOTES ON TERMS EMPLOYED

The ethno-sociological terms in current use are not always apt or accurate. Their vagueness may lead to misunderstanding. A word of explanation is necessary with regard to some such terms employed in this book.

Evolution, development, develop, &c., should be regarded as words expressing a change or consecutive changes in certain directions, not as terms of an evolutionary theory.

Borrowing. A term sometimes applied to the acquisition of technical skill, the use of implements, ideas, devices for treating the sick, dealing with supernatural ideas, social institutions, &c., is often misleading in its use. In most of these cases there is no question of a subsequent return. For the purpose of ethnological inquiries the only meaning considered is that of 'taking over'. Therefore the term *borrowing* has been as far as possible avoided in the text.

Clan, sept, tribe, and family, are words of more direct bearing on the subject of this book. They are somewhat indiscriminately used in anthropological literature. American writers have introduced an additional term, *gens*, to designate a patrilineal clan. Its acceptance by English and German authors would help to enrich the terminology required. In this volume, however, the term has not been used.

Clan. Primitive life is based on clan life. The clan generally forms the supreme unit economically and politically. It represents a more stabilized aggregation of families. Among hunting and collecting tribes these aggregations are seldom permanent. Under the influence of stratification the clan changes. It is resolved partly into more or less independent manors, partly into castes and guilds.

The term *clan* by no means always connotes the same idea. Its meaning changes with the conditions of life. The clan is an association of close relatives, originally residing on the same spot and observing their own traditions. These traditions often survive even the changes brought about by divisions and migrations. The new settlements may unite on certain occasions for the performance of a common ritual, or the fractions of clans—the *septs*—who have taken up their abode together may unite against a hostile attack. A new clan may of course originate from the breaking up of the old one. Then the links with the latter fall into oblivion.

The greatest danger which threatens a clan is its *stratification* by a foreign tribe belonging to another cultural zone, e.g. pastoral people may force on the agriculturists an unfair exchange of their respective produce. Once stratification has been established the clan institution changes and begins to dissolve (see Part III, Chap. I). As a consequence, the patriarchal family becomes paramount. The caste consists of an aggregation of families within a stratified society. Ancient clan relations may partially survive as ceremonial or marriage units. If these are obliterated generally strict observances subsist in the form of traditions.

Sept. If a clan with fixed traditions splits, these splits are termed *septs*. By the time a *sept* becomes a clan it loses its relations to the mother clan. Several *septs* may unite.

Tribe. A tribe is generally European inference from a number of clans having similar language, institutions, and implements. In fact it is rarely a conscious unit, still less a political body. The term 'tribe' is loosely used for a number of clans not expressly named but enjoying similar institutions.

A *tribe* means a simple group, speaking a common language, using similar weapons, implements, and contrivances. It is primarily a cultural unit, its political organization, if there is any, being of secondary importance. Economically the clans and settlements of the tribe usually exchange their goods. They are in *commercium* and often also in *connubium* with each other. The phrase *tribal life* generally refers to life in clans, *septs*, or associations of clans. The term *detrribalization* refers to the breaking-up of the traditional clan organization and should rather be termed declanization.

Family. The expression *family* in this book is used in the sense of a group consisting of a man, his wife (or wives), and his dependent children, own or adopted. This definition seems simple; the reality, however, is far from being so. Among predatory tribes of hunters and collectors the family is usually part of a clan, but has some characteristic traits. It consists of persons of differing age and sex, acting in co-operation for economic purposes and mutual help, whereas a clan is mainly led by men and has chiefly political, religious, and social aims.

Patriarchal families are different from those within the clan-bond. This is a *familia* (extended family, *Grossfamilie*, *famille globale*), in the ancient Roman sense of the word. It may include the married children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and associates a number of serfs, often holding tenants in dependence. It is distinct from the clan or *sept* in that it always resides on the same spot under a patriarchal head. An exception is the polygamous family, in which a man has not only several wives in different huts but also in different villages, paying them visits in rotation.

The distinction between *clan* and *family* is important and difficult. Both terms pertain to a group of relatives. But the clan is essentially something lasting, the family comes to an end when the parents die and the children marry. In more primitive conditions the clan is of superior importance to the family, economically as well as socially, for the clan is the representative of political power.

State. A term employed for any aggregation of clans, castes, &c., under a dominant family, *sept*, or clan.

Settlement. A village settlement can consist of one or more clans or *septs*, of castes and guilds. As to terms for the various settlements: the houses of a *sept* may be called a *hamlet*; a *village* may be inhabited by several *septs* living together; the habitation of a *familia* with serfs and slaves may be termed a *manor*. For a political aggregation of families settled in one place the term *community* is applied.

Ethnic is used in reference to racial (physical), social, and spiritual traditions together, rather than to those of habits and customs only.

Society may be called:

(a) *Homogeneous*, if it is without institutional group-distinctions of birth or wealth (an individual in a homogeneous society may, however, acquire personal prestige).

(b) *Stratified*, if it is composed of two or more ethnical bodies having a definite traditional position in relation to one another. That is to say, the one considers the others as superior or inferior, and these valuations are accepted by each. Ethnical origins may be blurred by blending, by the growing importance of wealth, and by the rise of persons born in a lower stratum while those of higher origin may correspondingly decline. This leads to *social stratification*. Conforming institutions correspond to these conditions.

(c) *Graded*, if it has an elaborate system of rank as between persons, families, and septs within the same stratum, whose relative positions are determined by combined consideration of birth and wealth and expressed by corresponding traditions and institutions.

Finally, two implements have to be described: the *digging-stick* and the *hoe*. The *digging-stick* is a pointed wooden tool, varying in length from 3 feet to 4 feet six inches (seldom more), similar to a Dutch hoe but without the metal tip. It is almost exclusively used by women, for planting out seedlings. The *hoe* is a tool composed originally of two sticks fastened together, like the *mer* of ancient Egypt. One stick is used as a handle to push the other into the soil. The second stick has a pointed end and may be tipped with a sharpened stone or piece of metal. It is mostly used by women, but also (as for instance in W. Africa) by men, to prepare the ground before the cereals are sown.

Particulars as to questions of family, kinship, political and social organization, law, &c., may be found in volumes II, III, and IV of the author's recently published five-volume work *Die menschliche Gesellschaft*.

INTRODUCTION

§ 1. Fallacy of 'the three stages'. § 2. Of what does economics consist?
§ 3. Variety of economic phenomena. § 4. Certain characteristic features
of primitive thought.

§ 1. In discussions on the economics of primitive society the problem of food-supply has until recently been the only one taken into account. Furthermore, thought in the last century was dominated by the theories of Darwin and Spencer, which tended to conceive cultural development along one line only. Consequently, we find economics treated from the same point of view, and this led to the theory of 'the three stages', by which all primitive economic development was traced through evolution from hunting to pastoral life and thence to agriculture. This has lasted until the present day.

The most effectual criticism of this theory was that of Edward Hahn, who insisted on the following points:

(1) Methods of tilling the soil must be distinguished according to whether the hoe and the digging-stick are used, or the ox-drawn plough. Therefore he differentiates between hoe- and plough-cultivation, the latter implying the use of animals to drag the implement.

(2) Hoe-cultivation must in no case be considered as an evolutionary step in pastoral development. It is rather directly connected with the women's custom of collecting fruits and roots.

(3) He laid stress on the special part played by women in providing such a regular daily supply.

(4) He suggested a religious motive for the use of oxen with the plough, as also for the invention of the wheel and the cart.

§ 2. It is unquestionable that the provision of food is of greater importance and demands a larger percentage of energy in the economic field among primitive communities than in our own. But the science of economics is not confined to the providing of food. Of what then does it consist? The devouring of newly killed beasts and the eating of freshly picked fruits and roots, pulled from the soil, certainly cannot be called economics. More than this is implied in the term. If there ever was a time when man, or his ancestor, lived from moment to moment on what he killed or caught, it was a time without economics. Economics is concerned not merely with the direction of the instincts, with the plans and calculations of the individual: it is a social affair, dealing with

different men as parts of a piece of interlocking machinery. The economics of the community practically consist of the economics of individual households. For example, among agricultural people, relatives and neighbours help one another and can be certain of equal assistance in their turn (a manifestation of the underlying principle of labour freely given for payment in kind). Hunting parties are also organized along the same lines. The members do not merely march together in a crowd, but give each other mutual support in the various operations of driving the game, beating the bush or setting it on fire, making pitfalls and ambuscades. The traditional hunting-grounds, the cultivated soil, and, among pastoral people, the pasture lands are similarly defended by mutual agreement and co-operation. Finally, commercial relations also are based on this principle, as we shall see later on. In primitive life the connexion between single households and the economics of the community is very close. Owing, however, to prejudice and to failure in adapting our thought to primitive conditions, false impressions have been given, and, consequently, the meaning of the evolutionary evidence has been distorted.

§ 3. The above classification of food-procuring methods is not, however, commensurate with the great variety of economic phenomena. Take, for instance, the South Sea people. From New Guinea to the Caroline and Mary Islands, from Timor to beyond Samoa, Hawaii, and Easter Island, the men are hunters, trappers, and fishers, while the women till the soil, with assistance from the men in clearing the bush. Over the whole of this vast area, the economic material is the same, but the organization of it is different. The Micronesian and Polynesian peoples have another political arrangement. There is a stratified population with a ruling aristocracy and a sacred king. The chiefs of the aristocratic clans, and especially the kings as the representatives of the first clan, receive the revenue, redistributing it later in the form of largesse among the population. Naturally they always keep something back for themselves and the maintenance of their slaves. In this way an exchange of economic goods from various districts is effected. This form of economics is quite distinct from that prevalent in Papua and Melanesia, where every small community is self-sufficing and almost independent of the rule even of a headman. Further, economics is not only concerned with methods of obtaining food, but also with the development of handicrafts, which have reached

a relatively high level among, for example, the Micronesians and Polynesians, while the Papuans and Melanesians are, in general, somewhat backward in this respect. In addition to this, the special spheres of activity of men and women ought to be considered.

§ 4. If we want to understand economics of primitive peoples we must also bring our minds back to the way in which primitive man thinks, and especially must we understand his interpretation of manual work and of every natural process as the manifestation of some magic power. In more complicated economic undertakings, as well as in the more involved technical processes, he tries to ensure success by certain ritual acts, as, for instance, the observing of omens and portents or the consulting of oracles.

A characteristic feature of primitive economics is the absence of any desire to make profits either from production or exchange. If money exists at all, its function is quite different from that fulfilled by it in our civilization. It never ceases to be concrete material, and it never becomes an entirely abstract representation of value. Consequently economic transactions refer more to the quality and kind of the real articles than to abstract values. The ambition of individuals, therefore, is not directed towards the acquisition of wealth, but is more interested in the kind of the work. In spite of their having no definite idea of economic profits, difficulties sometimes arise in barter because relative values are not always clearly apprehended. There is always perplexity when the existing rate of exchange has to be adapted to meet a new situation. With the *Kula* exchange, for instance, the gifts must be presented with due ceremonies, but without haggling. Nevertheless, owing to the common human failings of vanity, selfishness, and envy, complaints and disputes may arise, sometimes issuing in an actual fight. Generous gifts, however, are unquestionably received with gratitude, although such prodigality has generally to be returned with corresponding lavishness.

In addition to these purely personal considerations, the situation in graded societies is further affected by the relative rank of the people concerned in the transactions. For example, a king or a chief or a member of an aristocratic clan is often bound to give a higher compensation than a commoner.

The whole theoretical system, however, may be completely altered by certain personal factors, if these happen to suit the exigencies of the moment. The importance of such alterations

must not be under-estimated in the lives of the natives, since they are the germs of change in customs and institutions. We are accustomed to overlook them because we usually deal with only one recent phase of native existence.

In each primitive society all aspects of life are harmonized into a complete whole. This is undoubtedly the consequence of a long adaptation of mental and institutional life to technical conditions. However adventurous the fate of the migratory tribes in Africa, Oceania, or Asia, &c., may have been, all their fights and wanderings brought relatively few acquisitions in new knowledge, abilities, and technical skill. They moved—spiritually and socially—therefore more in a circle than on a progressive line, and petrified mentally to some extent. They always fell back upon the same ways of procuring and caring for their livelihood. This indicates the enormous momentum of their traditional economics.

Progress needs contact and intermingling of ideas, institutions, and men as inciting factors. But regularly, after a period of impregnation, a combination and consolidation is required in order to establish a harmonized and balanced system of new mental habits, usages, and social institutions. Progress is a rhythm of human life, not a mechanical line, and it passes through stages of impregnation, of consolidation, and of dissolution. Those tribes could not progress who stuck to their old customs and lived an isolated peripheral life, but those who adventured upon new ideas and searched for an impact of cultures in an association of peoples. The most inspiring examples are the many forms of contact between herdsmen and agriculturists—whereas the hunters, trappers, and collectors fled and retired to the peripheral regions of the centres of human cultural life, such as forests, deserts, and ice regions, and remained as isolated relics of man's past.

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309

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INDEX

(Names of Authors referred to are in *italics*.)

- Abyssinia, 122-3, 139, 164-5, 174, 232-3, 251.
 Agriculturists, 23, 24, 28, 63, 64, 68, 70, 87-92, 94-5, 99-100, 188; origin of, 5, 7.
 Ainu, 19.
 Akikuyu, 123, 166.
Amundsen, 203.
 Ankole, 244-5.
 Aranda, 19, 146.
Armstrong, 176.
 Ashanti, 131, 187.
Asmis, 273.
 Astronomy, 50, 70, 119-20.
 Australia, 17, 18, 22, 54, 74, 142, 160, 268; *see also* Aranda and Dieri.
- Bachhouse*, 53.
Bacon, 204.
 Ba-Ila, 223-4, 227, 236-7, 240-1, 242.
 Baining, 53, 67; *see also* New Guinea.
 Bakitara, 10, 33, 91, 96, 128, 200, 245-6, 272.
 Banks Islands, 11, 20, 21, 55, 68, 147.
 Bantu, 54.
 Banyankole, 33, 75, 96, 125, 205-8.
 Barter, *see* Trade.
Barton, 134.
 Batutsi, 91, 200.
 Baziba, 27.
Beaver, 49, 253.
 Bedouin, 23.
Beech, 200.
Bell, 203.
 Benue, 164.
 Bergdama, 6, 7, 16-19, 22, 33, 38, 47, 48, 59, 62, 76, 84, 106, 118, 187-8, 190, 191, 220, 223, 255.
Bergmann, 285.
Best, 70, 72.
Bieber, 123, 166, 174.
Binger, 257.
 Biemarck Archipelago, 21.
 Blood Feud, 9.
 Boans, 23.
Boas, 64, 77, 115, 116.
Ballig, 121.
 Boloki, 234-5.
 Boomerang, distribution of, 8, 54-5.
Born, 185.
Bowdich, 163.
Braungart, 28.
 Brazilian tribes, 119.
Brinkopf, 227.
- Brown*, 126.
Brown, Radcliffe, 61, 199, 220.
Bücher, 170, 268.
Buck, 72.
 Bushmen (South Africa), 25, 60.
- Caroline Islands, 11, 18, 26, 50, 52, 116, 176, 185, 188, 197.
 Cattle, *see* Pastoral and Hunters.
Chamberlain, 29.
 China (ancient), 259-60, 282-4.
 Collectivism, cattle, 269; family, 270-2; land, 266-8, 271; horses, 272; relation to individual, 281; spoil, 268-9; women, 272; work, 269-70; *see also* Property.
 Communism, *see* Collectivism.
 Congo dwarfs, 33.
Cook, 94.
Crévaux, 136.
Czaplicka, 177, 269.
Czechanowski, 75, 164, 184, 200.
- Dapper*, 143, 152, 186, 257, 258.
Darmestetter, 184, 285.
Decary, 273.
de Morgan, 203.
Dennett, 201.
Descamps, 15, 113.
 Despotisms, 100-1, 105-6, 279-80; *see also* Feudalism.
 Dieri, 145-6.
 Diffusion, 7-9, 12-14, 33-8, 41-8, 66.
 Dobuans, 26.
Dopsch, 168, 169, 170, 238.
Driberg, 90, 177.
- Eating, emotional attitudes, 16, 19-21; ritual, 16, 17, 19-21; separation of sexes, 17-18; *see also* Food.
 Economic types, 4-5.
 Egypt, 20, 43, 100-1.
Erdland, 50, 120.
Erhes, 93.
 Eskimo, 16, 60, 61.
 Evolution, theory in primitive economics, 285-8.
 Ewe, 132-3, 157, 181, 189, 273.
 Exchange, *see* Trade.
Eylmann, 269.
- Feudalism, European, 203-4; Oriental, origin of, 12, 195-200; personal bonds, 201-3.

- Fewkes*, 26.
Firth, 49, 70, 72, 177, 178, 215.
Fischel, 256.
 Food, 38, 64, 74; division of, 69; feasts, 18, 19; *see also* Eating.
Forbes, 267.
Fourneaux, 53.
Frazer, 20.
Friederici, 53.
Fromm, 85.
Fülleborn, 24, 25.
- Galla, 158, 167.
 Gazelle Peninsula, 11, 28, 67-8.
 Germanic Tribes, 99-100, 168-70, 238.
 Gilyaks, 19.
Glutz, 216.
Gogtschayschwili, 125.
 Gosiute, 29.
Grosse, 282.
Gutmann, 164.
- Haddon*, 121.
Hagen, 22, 158, 268.
Hahl, 67, 215.
 Handicraft, carving, 47, 117; division of labour, 114; for barter, 114-15, 121, 123, 131; metals, 115-16; pottery, 115, 118-19, 123, 125; smiths, 89-90, 123-4, 128-31; social status, 49, 134-5; weaving, 71-2.
Harrison, 46.
Hatt, 78.
Heepe, 67.
Henderson, 53.
Herero, 6, 108, 118, 173.
Herodotus, 134.
Herskovits, 184.
Hintze, 195, 204.
Hobhouse, 241.
Hose, 155, 278.
Howitt, 146, 160, 269.
Hübner, 238.
 Hunters, 6, 7; care of animals, 76-8; manner of hunting, 53-4, 59-60; settlements, 22; transition to herds-men, 77; way of living, 59.
Hutton, 257.
- Incas, 10, 13, 48, 121, 197, 271.
 Indians (American), 77, 78, 197; Gosiute, 29; Iroquois, 46, 197; Pawnees, 197, 228-9; Pueblo, 26; Uitoto, 19.
 Individualism, 278-9; of families, 86-7.
 Inventions, 33-5, 38, 41-6, 48, 275.
 Irrigation systems, 93.
- Johnson*, 201.
Joyce, 101, 122, 166, 204, 228, 249, 272.
- Kahrstedt*, 101.
Kandt, 104.
Karsten, 65.
Keysser, 64, 117, 175.
Khandekar, 270.
Knabenhans, 160, 179, 268.
Koppers, 220.
Kornemann, 78.
Kpelle, 124, 150-3, 165, 237, 249-50, 258.
Krafft, 223.
Krauss, 271.
Kroeber, 179, 252.
Kropf, 83.
Kubary, 50, 176, 258, 263.
Kuiper, 143.
- La Billardière*, 53.
 Labour, communal, 211; division of (general), 4, 69-70, 122; ethnic division of, 130; family division of, 114-15, 119-21, 126-8, 132-3; regional division of, 123-5, 131-3, 212; sexual division of, 65, 68, 82, 88, 90, 110, 114-15, 125, 212, 215; aesthetic demands, 212-15; mental attitudes, 209-10; organization of, 212-13; rewards, 210-11; social motives, 177-9.
- Lacouperie*, 260.
Lambert, 29, 179.
Lange, 203.
Lango, 87-90.
Laum, 260, 263.
Leitner, 228.
Lenoir, 116.
Letourneau, 268.
Lewinski, 271.
Lieberman, 167-8, 238.
Linne, 48.
Livingstone, 60.
Loango, 181-3, 201-3, 225-6, 237-8, 258.
Loewenthal, 46.
- Maas*, 52.
MacLeod, 60.
MacNeill, 271.
Mafulu, 17-18, 253, 264.
 Magic, with food, 21, 49, 70-1, 78.
 Malay Archipelago, 52.
Malinowski, 19, 27, 28, 114, 131, 132, 137, 138, 139, 141, 142, 148, 175, 179, 183, 197, 209, 253, 267.
Mangin, 237.

- Maori, 13, 49, 68-72, 177-8, 186, 214, 230-2.
 Marind-anin, 23, 29.
 Markets, 153-5, 157, 159-70.
 Marshall Islands, 50-1, 119.
 Masai, 153-4, 172.
Maurizio, 94.
Maxwell, 204.
Mayer, Ernst, 100.
Mayns, 270.
Means, 94.
Meinhof, 67, 282.
Meisner, 78, 94.
Melville, 53.
Merker, 139, 153, 154, 172, 269.
Mestorf, 258.
 Mexico, 13, 20, 101, 115, 188, 197, 248-9.
Meyer, Ed., 99, 134, 170.
Meyer, Felix, 173.
 Micronesia, 50-2, 197-9.
Mielke, 28.
 Money, 105-6; early forms, 255-60; measurement of value, 260-5; origin, 252-5.
 Montelius, 100.
Mooherji, 203.
Müller-Wismar, 18, 116, 126, 229, 258.
Munzinger, 165, 174, 184, 232, 233, 241, 251.
Muris, 229.

Nansen, 16, 61, 189.
 Navigation, 49-53.
Negelein, 78.
Neurath, 99.
 New Britain, *see* Bismarck Archipelago.
 New Guinea, 18, 26, 28, 29, 39, 48, 49, 63, 67, 117, 119, 121, 152, 160, 213, 252, 253, 261, 269.
 New Hebrides, 11, 37, 54, 68, 126, 161-2.
Nieboer, 227, 228, 235.
Nordenskiöld, 42, 43, 45.

 Ovambo, 90, 108, 142, 172, 255.

Paasonen, 68.
Pallas, 83.
 Pangwe, 125, 129, 150.
 Papuans, 15, 63, 66-7, 160, 269-70.
 Parkinson, 53.
 Pastoral, 7, 23, 73-5; care of cattle, 82-4, 87, 95-7; cattle as capital, 83-4; mental attitudes, 84; origin of cattle-keeping, 5; stratification, 79-92.
Passargo, 164, 282.
Paulitschke, 139, 156, 158, 167, 272.
 Pawnees, 197, 228-9.

 Payments, *see* Trade.
Peake, 204, 273, 274.
Pechuel-Lösche, 65, 139, 157, 168, 182, 201, 203, 216, 226, 238.
 Pelew Islands, 51, 176, 258, 263.
Perry, 257.
 Peru, 10, 13, 77, 101, 115, 121, 188, 239, 271-3.
Pfeiffer, 53.
Phillips, 48.
 Pigmies, 67.
 Popoko, 18.
 Population factors, 15.
 Pottery, *see* Handicraft.
Preuss, 19.
 Price, 257.
 Primitive economics, comparison with modern, 281-4.
 Property, communal, 60-1, 109, 181-2, 187-9; private, 60-1, 86, 177, 182, 289-94, 205-8, 276; social function of, 186; *see also* Feudalism.
 Pueblo, 26, 197.

Radin, 197.
 Rank, 26-7, 75; *see also* Feudalism.
Rattray, 131, 177, 187.
Rehra, 27.
Reuterskiöld, 21.
Rivers, 17, 20, 21, 55, 74, 147.
Rivet, 48.
Rodd, 82.
Roscoe, 75, 78, 91, 96, 126, 128, 162, 200, 205, 208, 228, 237, 242, 245, 246, 272.
Rostovtzeff, 99.
Roth, 20, 53, 136, 146, 160, 261.
Rouffaer, 257.
Routledge, 124, 167.

Sahagun, 20.
 Samoa, 13, 26, 186, 199-200, 246-8.
Sanderson, 237.
Sarfert, 18, 50, 52, 199, 229.
Schenk, 142.
Schmidt, 179.
Schneider, 95, 97, 98, 240, 259.
Schumacher, 168.
Schurtz, 262.
Schweinfurth, 255.
Schwenzner, 102.
 Secret societies, 11, 12, 55, 68, 116, 161-2.
Seligman, 49, 119, 147, 149, 152, 155, 254.
 Serfdom, defined, 243-4; various forms, 244-51, 292; *see also* Slavery.
 Settlements, 'colonial villages', 28; plan, 23-8; naming, 28-9; moving, 29-32; family, 90.

- Shirokogoroff*, 177.
Sirelius, 78.
 Slavery, 9, 67, 111, 293-4; decline, 241-2; defined, 217-18; different forms, 221-6, 229-40; origin of, 215-6, 218-21; raids, 228; redemption, 240-1; trade in, 227-8; *see also* Serfdom.
Smith and Dale, 224, 225, 227, 236, 237, 241, 242.
 Smiths, *see* Handicraft.
Soergel, 190.
 Solomon Islands, 8, 17, 21, 28, 29, 37, 54, 141.
 South America, 42-6.
Speiser, 11, 68, 127, 162.
Spiegelberg, 101.
Spieß, 233.
Spieth, 132, 133, 158, 181, 189.
Spencer and Gillen, 146, 269.
Staschewski, 155, 157.
Steinmetz, 233.
Sternberg, 203, 273.
Strehlow, 17, 19, 179.
Studer, 76.
Stuhlman, 158, 168, 174.
 Sumerians, 94-8, 106, 258-9.
 Swahili, 142, 154, 173, 227, 235-6.
 Tahiti, 11, 248.
 Tasmanians, 53-4.
 Taxes, 108; *see also* Feudalism.
Tessmann, 125, 130, 150, 151.
Thurnwald, 17, 21, 100, 141, 175, 189, 203, 211, 240.
Tischler, 257, 258.
 Todas, 74.
Tönjes, 90-1, 142, 172.
Torday, 67.
 Torres Straits, 47.
 Trade, barter, 141-2, 153, 171-4, 108, 114; exchange, 69, 87, 105, 131; ceremonial presents, 141, 150-2; at feasts, 146-7; with Europeans, 143, 158; markets, 153-5, 157, 159-70; payments, for return services, 136-40, to specialists, 138-9; social function of, 137-8, 140, 175-6; potlatch, 107-108; reciprocity, 106; trading expeditions, 142-3, 145-9, 152-7; silent, 149-50; *see also* Feudalism.
Tregear, 232.
Trimborn, 101, 271.
 Trobriand Islands, 18-19, 26, 28, 66, 74, 85, 105, 131-2, 137, 138-42, 147, 176, 183-4, 196-7, 209-10, 263, 267.
Truk, 120.
 Tuareg, 6, 34, 79-82, 276.
 Ufipa, 85.
 Uitoto, 19.
Unger, 94.
Varges, 168.
 Vedas, 20.
 Veddas, 25, 59, 149, 155.
Vedder, 16, 18, 22, 48, 62, 76, 118, 187, 188, 190, 191, 223, 255.
Velten, 143, 154, 173, 228.
Vinogradoff, 191.
 Wanyamwesi, 173-4.
 Wealth, capital, 108-10; social function of, 175-7, 179-84; women as, 180; *see also* Money.
 Weaving, *see* Handicraft.
Weber, 20, 97.
Weeks, 235.
West, 144.
Westermann, 93, 124, 140, 150, 151, 153, 165, 237, 250.
Wheeler, 142.
Widowson, 53.
Williamson, 17, 18, 153, 199, 200, 248, 264.
Wilson, 93.
Wirz, 23, 24, 28, 29, 116, 161, 213, 270.
Wisler, 188, 191, 197, 272.
Wissmann, 233.
 Women, social position of, 8, 81, 110-11; *see* Labour, division of.
 Yakut, 269.
 Yap, 13, 18, 229.
 Yaunde, 67.
 Ysabel, 17.
Zech, 180.
Zintgraff, 156.
Zoričić, 271.

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