

THE CONCEPTS OF “TRIBE” AND “CHIEFDOM” IN CURRENT POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, ETHNOLOGY, AND THE HISTORY OF PRIMITIVE SOCIETY: A GAME OF TERMS?

V.A. Popov

The paper is dedicated to different interpretations of the concepts of “tribe” (племя) and “chiefdom” (вождество). In Western political anthropology, a “tribe” is defined as a segmentary political structure where each segment (community, lineage) is economically independent, and leadership is personal and does not involve any formal positions. In evolutionary schemes, a tribe is usually placed between a primitive community and a chiefdom. In Soviet ethnology and history of primitive society was dominated by ethnic and social constructivism, which extrapolated speculative models of Marxist theory of primitiveness into the past. The tribe was declared as a primitive ethno-potestarian institution that combined the primary form of an ethnic community (within the framework of the triad “tribe – nationality – nation”) and a potestarian organization. However, by the end of the 20th century, the ambiguity of the concept of “tribe” was realized, in fact, it lost its former conceptuality and turned into a phantom. Currently, Russian ethnologists avoid using the concept of “tribe” and use the term “ethnos” and its derivatives (“ethnic community”, “ethnic group”, etc.), as well as the concept of “people”, which have no stadial reference and do not evoke associations with primitiveness. Russian political anthropologists replace the term “tribe/potestarian tribe” with the term “chiefdom”. At the same time, the concept of “chiefdom” is not so unambiguous and heuristic. In fact, a chiefdom is an intermediate form of socio-political organization (between a community and an early state) with centralized governance and hierarchy of hereditary chiefs. But there is no formal and even less legal repressive apparatus. Most researchers consider chiefdom to be a universal stage in the evolution of political institutions, which often leads to the “fitting” and “adaptation” of a specific data to a “fashionable” concept. In other words, chiefdoms, or their analogues, began to define

Vladimir Aleksandrovitch Popov, PhD, Dr.Habil. in History, Professor, Professor at the Faculty of History and Social Sciences of Pushkin Leningrad State University, Chief Researcher at the Faculty of Asian and African Studies (“Vostochny” Faculty) of Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Владимир Александрович Попов, доктор исторических наук, профессор, профессор факультета истории и социальных наук Ленинградского государственного университета им. А.С.Пушкина, главный научный сотрудник Восточного факультета Санкт-Петербургского государственного университета, Санкт-Петербург, Россия.

E-mail: popoffvladimir@gmail.com

any early political formations (including early states) with signs of a social hierarchy and the presence of some kind of potestarian apparatus.

Keywords: tribe, chiefdom, ethnos, ethnicity, potestarity, primitiveness, political anthropology, ethnology, history of primitive (prehistorical) society.

In current political anthropology, the “tribe” is defined as a segmentary political structure in which each segment (community, lineage) is economically independent and leadership is personal and does not involve any formal positions. In evolutionary schemes, the tribe is usually placed between the primitive community and the chiefdom (Service 1971: 100–104; Sahlins 1968: VII), despite Elman Service’s exclusion of the tribe as an obligatory stage of evolution from his scheme of levels of political integration (under the influence of Morton Fried) (Service 1975). Some researchers have defined the tribe based on the absence of certain features characteristic of chiefdoms or early states, emphasizing egalitarianism and acephality. There are some very simple and obscure formulations like “more family, but less nation, bound by ties of kinship and obligation” (Prins 1985: 869).

In Soviet ethnology/ethnography and history of primitive (prehistorical) society was dominated by the L.H. Morgan’s view of the Iroquoian tribes as interpreted by F. Engels. In other words, social and ethnic constructivism flourished, extrapolating speculative model of the Marxist theory of primitive society into the past. A “tribe” is declared as a primitive ethno-potestarian (ethno-social) institute combining the primary form of an ethnic community (within the framework of the famous triad “tribe – nationality – nation”) and a potestarian organization (see the overview: Popov 2015: 14–25).

There is no single or more or less coordinated point of view on genesis, development, typology, and especially on the ratio of ethnic and potestial in the tribe, although some authors distinguish between the primary tribe (initial, early, pre-tribe) and classical one (late tribe, potestarian tribe), or the tribe itself. As a rule, they are associated with various life support system. The primary tribe (among hunters and gatherers) is a kind of proto-ethnos or ethnicos (ethnos in its pure form), in terms of Yu.V. Bromley 1983), in which there are no strong potestarian functions and unified rulers and controls institutions, but there is unity of territory, economy, language (dialect) and awareness of a common origin, reflected in self-identity and self-name.

Socially, the primary tribe is usually treated as either an over-community level of social organization (mainly endogamous) that unites several interrelated clan communities, or as a set of epigamous¹ clans, usually

¹ Epigamy is the custom of mutual marriages.

two, characterizing the initial (embryonic) tribe as a dual-generic organization. In other words, the tribe allows two ways of dividing into the main components — along the line of the clans and the line of communal institutions that overlapped each other; the reproduction of the tribe was carried out in the form of the continuity of socially organized generations.

The classical tribe is characterized by a great degree of ethno-cultural and social-potestarian design; the integrity of this type of tribe was provided by kinship (real or fictitious) and potestarian institutions headed by the chief, which also stipulated a greater degree of ethno-cultural unification, i.e. the classical tribe is an ethno-potestarian organism. The clans of one tribe could grow, mature, form phratries, and there were specific tribes with a dual or triple-phratrian organization. Classical tribes are characteristic of farmers and pastoralists of the late pre-historic era. During this era, early political (military-political) associations (unions, leagues, federations, confederations) of related and neighboring tribes were also characteristic. These associations were often hierarchically organized according to the principle of inequality (incompleteness) between separate tribes (“younger”, “adopted”, etc.) and formed the basis for the formation of chiefdoms or early state structures (or their analogues), such as the so-called barbarian kingdoms of the ancient Germans and the first principalities of the Slavs (Popov 2014a: 434–436, 2014b: 401).

The delineation of *ethnocos* and *ethnos*, in fact, a compromise solution that divides the tribe into two different phenomena. In this connection, the natural question arises: what is primary — the *ethnos*, creating a polity (state, chiefdom) or polity, creating an *ethnos*? It should be noted that, for example, a significant number of large *ethnoses* of contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa (Malinke, Songhai, Yoruba, Bakongo, Baganda, Banyarwanda, Bagirmi, Zulu, etc.) are traces of the political formations that existed in the pre-colonial era. This is evidenced by the ethnonymy, since many ethnonyms are clearly derived from politonyms (such as Moors, Azande, Malinke, as well as Bakongo, Baluba, Barundi and the self-names of many other Bantu-speaking peoples) or even coincide with the names of potestarian and political organisms (Songhai, Dagomba, Mamprusi, Gonja, Bamum, Bagirmi, Swazi, etc.), which in their turn are overwhelmingly toponyms, and often are the names of the capitals of political entities (Bini, Duala, Harari, etc.).

Apparently, the potestarian-political structure, and above all the unified system of power and management of a particular political organism, helps to strengthen its integrity, as it provides intensive contacts and information links within it, that is, it performs stabilizing and integrating functions, creating prerequisites for consolidation population into a single cultural and linguistic community, or *ethnos*. In other words, the correlation of ethno-cultural and potestarian-political

processes leads to the awareness of the population of a given political organism of its ethnic specifics as an expression of the unity and homogeneity of the potestarian-political community and, ultimately, quite naturally forms an ethno-potestarian and/or ethno-political organisms. This mechanism of the emergence and development of ethnicity/ethnic culture was proposed to be called a modus of potestarity, or a potestarian-political mode (Popov 2004: 53–54, 2010: 41, 2014: 372–380).

There were also secondary tribes formed in synpolitean primitive societies under conditions of inter-formation interaction with more developed neighbours and especially under the influence of European bourgeois societies during the Great Geographical Discoveries and the Modern Age. Such secondary tribes, as a rule, were transformed into parapolitean societies – unstable formations that reproduced the forms of European political structures (for more information, see: Popov 1995: 188–204, 2019: 142–157).

In the colonial period, in many colonies of European powers practicing indirect control, tribal constructs as instrument of colonial administrations were created. The easiest example is Igbo in Nigeria, as well as the tribes of Tanganyika. So, the view of M. Fried about the secondary nature of the tribes is a reflection of real practice (Fried 1975). There was also a need to distinguish between real and nominal (fictitious) ethnic groups (Girenko 1977: 70–79), although the colonial authorities implemented not so much the construction of ethnicity as the potestarity in the interests of governance. At the same time, tribes constructed as potestarian organisms are now turning into ethnic communities (ethnocoses) (see, for example, the article on the emergence of ethnicity among the Suku potestarian tribe in Congo-Zaire: Kopytoff 2002: 234–250).

However, by the end of the 20th century, terminological ambiguity of the concept of “tribe” was realized. In fact, the concept of “tribe” lost its former conceptuality and turned into a phantom. Currently, Russian ethnologists avoid using the concept of “tribe” and other ethnological terms of Soviet science, such as “nationality” and “nation”. Most researchers use more neutral concepts like “people” or “ethnos” and its derivatives (“ethnic communities”, “ethnic groups”, etc.), especially the terms “ethnic group” and “people” that have no stadial reference and do not evoke associations with primitiveness.

In history of primitive society and social anthropology, the “tribe” acts as synonym for “primitive/prehistoric society”. Thus, it is very significant that in N.M. Girenko’s monograph, entitled “Sociology of the Tribe” (Girenko 1991), the word “tribe” is mentioned only three times, and the book itself is actually devoted to the study of various problems of primitiveness (cf. with the stable in the past phrase “tribal structure” / “племенной строй”).

With the concept of the “tribe” I first had to “figure out” and “understand” about 40 years ago, when it became necessary to attribute *oman* — one of the main social institutions among the Akan peoples living in the territory of modern Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire. The largest Akan’s early polities, the Ashanti Confederation and the Fanti Federation, were alliances of several omans. In the scientific literature of the late 19th — mid 20th centuries these omans were usually referred to as kingdoms, principalities, provinces or tribes, in later — chiefdoms, early states, tribal states, communities or a set of villages. As a more adequate, I then chose the term “tribe”, since the structure-forming components of oman fully corresponded to Morgan’s definition of the tribe (cf.: each oman consisted of village communities (*akura*), matrilineal clans (*abusua*) and patrilineal units of the military organization (*asafo*), which overlapped each other, but the military organization played a decisive role in the structure of oman; oman was headed by the chief (*omanhene*), his co-ruler (*omanhema*) and the council of elders (Popov 1980: 4–24)). Later, I made a correction, describing oman as a “tribe-chiefdom” or simply a “chiefdom” (Popov 1990: 104–109). This was the trend in African studies — the term “tribe (potestarian tribe)” began to be replaced by the term “chiefdom”.

With the concept of “tribe” there is what always happens when one term refers to different phenomena — namely the loss of terminological uniqueness and conversion into a phantom. At the same time, the concept of “tribe” is still popular among Russian historians-medievalists and archeologists, who identify archeological cultures with tribes, most often bearing in mind ethnic communities. In the same sense, the term “tribe” is used by many Africanists and Americanists, who study the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa and the American Indians (Native Americans). It should be noted that the term “tribe” is used in the English-language scientific literature and journalism to designate large ethnic communities, numbering tens of millions of people, primarily African (e.g., Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulbe, Zulus, Bakongo, etc.). They are very far from being primitive tribes and are analogues to large nations. The use of the term “tribe” contributed to the emergence of the concept of tribalism. Tribalism is one of the most complex and acute problems in the internal political development of most African and other developing countries. It can be interpreted in two ways: as a kind of nationalism and separatism, and adherence to cultural, cults and socio-political separateness, including the desire to preserve the attributes of primitive customs, traditional beliefs, clan organizations, large families, the structure of community self-government, etc.

Modern Russian political anthropologists replace the term “tribe / potestarian tribe” with the term “chiefdom” or its analogues. At the same

time, the concept of “chieftom” is not so unambiguous and heuristic. In fact, the chieftom is an inter-mediate form of socio-political organization (between the community and the early state) with centralized governance, hierarchy of hereditary chiefs and nobles, and social and property inequality. Yet, there is no formal or even less legal repressive apparatus. The chieftaincy power system is characterized by chiefs — institutionalized hereditary leaders who become leaders in the economic, socio-potestarian, military, and ideological spheres of life. From an economic point of view, the role of the chieftom is to accumulate and distribute basic material wealth.

According to the degree of structural complexity, it is customary to distinguish between simple, complex (compound), and supercomplex (maximum) chieftoms. A simple chieftoms (e.g., Trobriand chieftoms) consist of a number of village communities, totaling up to several thousand people, united under the authority of a chief who resides in a central settlement. A complex chieftom, such as Hawaiian chieftoms, is a two-level (or more) group of simple chieftoms that are subordinated to the administration of a supreme chief. Typically, the potestarian apparatus of the chief is exempt from direct participation in production. The population can reach 30,000 people. Three-tier (or more) supercomplex chieftoms (e.g., the Turkic Khaganate or the Bamum “kingdom” in the forest zone of Cameroon) may have ethnically heterogeneous populations, and can number up to several tens of thousands of people (for more information see the reviews: Kradin 1995: 11–61, 2015: 4–12).

Most researchers consider chieftom to be a universal stage in the evolution of political institutions organizations (although chieftoms are not typically found in ethnic communities of Melanesia), which often leads to “fitting” and “adaptation” of a specific data to a “fashionable” (or “trendy”) concept. In other words, chieftoms, or its analogues, began to define any early political formations (including early states) with signs of social hierarchy and the presence of some kind of potestarian apparatus (cf. Skalnik 2004).

REFERENCES

- Bromley Yu.V. 1983. *Essays on the Theory of Ethnos*. Moscow: Nauka. (In Russ.)
 Fried M.H. 1975. *The Notion of Tribe*. Menlo Park (Calif.): Cummings Pub. Co.
 Girenko N.M. 1977. Tendencies of the Ethnic Development of Unyamwezi in the 19th Century. *Ethnic History of Africa. Pre-colonial Period*. Ed. by D.A. Oldenogge. Moscow: Nauka, 70–90. (In Russ.)
 Girenko N.M. 1991. *Sociology of the Tribe. The Genesis of Sociological Theory and the Main Components of Social Dynamics*. Leningrad: Nauka. (In Russ.)

- Kopytoff I.G. 2002. The Process of Ethnogenesis in South-Western Congo-Zaire: The Emergence of the Suku Ethnos. *Ethnologica Africana. In Memoriam of D.A. Ol'derogge*. Ed. by N.B. Kochakova. Moscow: Muravey, 234–250. (In Russ.)
- Kradin N.N. 1995. Chiefdom: Current State and Problems of Study. *Early Forms of Political Organization: From Primitiveness to Statehood*. Ed. by V.A. Popov. Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 11–61. (In Russ.)
- Kradin N.N. 2015. The Term “Tribe” in Contemporary Anthropology. *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana*, No 2, 4–12. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 1980. Ashanti Oman as a Variant of Tribal Organization. *Africa: History, Historiography*. Ed. by S.Yu. Abramova. Moscow: Nauka, 4–24. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 1990. *Ethnosocial History of the Akans in the 16th–19th Centuries. Problems of Genesis and Formational Development of Ethnopolitical Organisms*. Moscow: Nauka. Glavnaya redaktsiya vostochnoy literatury. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 1995. Politogenetic Controversy, Parapolitism and Phenomenon of Secondary Statehood. *Early Forms of Political Organization: From Primitiveness to Statehood*. Ed. by V.A. Popov. Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 188–204. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 2004. Potestarian-political Factors of Ethnogenesis. *Radlov Readings—2004*. Conference Materials. Saint Petersburg: Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera), RAS, 53–54. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 2010. On the Correlation of Ethnogenetic and Politogenetic Processes, or Potestarity as a Mode of Ethnogenesis. *3rd Russian Congress on Culturology with International Participation “Creativity in the Sphere of Tradition and Innovation”*. Conference Materials. October 27th–29th, 2010. Saint Petersburg: Eidos, 41. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 2014. *Algebra of Kinship and Power. Studies on the Anthropology of Kinship and Political Anthropology*. Moscow, Saint Petersburg: The Institute for African Studies, RAS, ANO «Tsentr informatizatsii obrazovaniya “KIO”». (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 2014a. Primitive Society. *New Russian Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (2). Moscow: Entsiklopediya, Infra-M, 434–436. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 2014b. Tribe. *Big Russian Encyclopaedia*, vol. 26. Moscow: Bol'shaya Rossiyskaya entsiklopediya, 401. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 2015. The Concept of “Tribe”, or Ethnicity and Potestarity All Rolled into One. *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana*, No 2, 14–25. (In Russ.)
- Popov V.A. 2019. The Phenomenon of Secondary Politogenesis and Parapolity in Pre-colonial Africa. *Politogenesis and Historical Dynamics of Political Institutions: From Local Potestarity to the Global World-system*. Ed. by L.E. Grinin. Moscow: Uchitel', 142–157. (In Russ.)
- Prins H.E.L. 1985. Tribe. *The Social Science Encyclopedia*. Ed. by A. Kuper, J. Kuper. London, Boston, Henley: Routledge & Kegan Pau, 869.
- Sahlins M.D. 1968. *Tribesmen*. Englewood Cliffs (New Jersey): Prentice-Hall.
- Service E.R. 1971. *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*. 2nd ed. New York: Random House.
- Service E.R. 1975. *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Skalnik P. 2004. Chiefdom: A Universal Political Formation? *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, No 43, 76–98.

**КОНЦЕПТЫ «ПЛЕМЯ» И «ВОЖДЕСТВО»
В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ АНТРОПОЛОГИИ,
ЭТНОЛОГИИ И ИСТОРИИ ПЕРВОБЫТНОГО ОБЩЕСТВА:
ИГРА В ТЕРМИНЫ?**

В.А. Попов

В статье рассматриваются различные трактовки концептов «племя» (*tribe*) и «вождество» (*chiefdom*). В зарубежной политической антропологии «племя» определяется как сегментарная политическая структура, в которой каждый сегмент (как по линии общинных, так и по линии родовых/клановых институтов) экономически независим, лидерство носит личный характер, аппарат управления отсутствует. В эволюционистских схемах племя обычно помещают между первобытной общиной и вождеством. В советской этнологии преобладал этнический и социальный конструктивизм, экстраполировавший в прошлое умозрительные модели марксистской теории первобытности. «Племя» декларировалось как первобытный этнопотестарный институт, сочетавший первичную форму этнической общности (в рамках триады «племя — народность — нация») и потестарную организацию. Однако к концу XX в. была осознана неоднозначность понятия «племя», фактически оно потеряло свою былую концептуальность и превратилось в фантом. В настоящее время российские этнологи избегают использования концепта «племя» и применяют термин «этнос» и его производные («этническая общность», «этническая группа» и др.), а также понятие «народ», не имеющие стадийальной привязки и не вызывающие ассоциаций с первобытностью. В российской политической антропологии «племя/потестарное племя» стали заменять термином «вождество». Но и концепт «вождество» не столь однозначен и эвристичен. Фактически вождество — это промежуточная (между общиной и ранним государством) форма социально-политической организации с централизованным управлением и иерархией наследственных вождей, но без легального репрессивного аппарата. Большинство исследователей считает вождество универсальной стадией в эволюции политических институтов, что часто приводит к «подгонке» конкретного материала под «модный» концепт. Иными словами, вождествами, или их аналогами, стали определять любые раннеполитические образования (в том числе и ранние государства), в которых появились признаки социальной иерархии и наличествует потестарный аппарат.

Ключевые слова: племя, вождество, этничность, потестарность, первобытное общество, политическая антропология, этнология, история первобытного общества.

Л И Т Е Р А Т У Р А

- Бромлей Ю.В. 1983. *Очерки теории этноса*. М.: Наука.
Гиренко Н.М. 1977. Тенденции этнического развития Уньямавети в XIX в. *Этническая история Африки. Доколониальный период*. Отв. ред. Д.А. Ольдерогге. М.: Наука, 70–90.

- Гиренко Н.М. 1991. *Социология племени. Становление социологической теории и основные компоненты социальной динамики*. Ленинград: Наука.
- Копытов И.Г. 2002. Процесс этногенеза в Юго-Западном Конго-Заире: возникновение этноса суку. *Ethnologica Africana. Памяти Д.А. Ольдерогге*. Отв. ред. Н.Б. Кочакова. М.: Муравей, 234–250.
- Крадин Н.Н. 1995. Вождество: современное состояние и проблемы изучения. *Ранние формы политической организации: от первобытности к государственности*. Отв. ред. В.А. Попов. М.: Восточная литература, 11–61.
- Крадин Н.Н. 2015. Понятие «племя» в современной антропологии. *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana*, № 2, 4–12.
- Попов В.А. 1980. Ашантийский оман как вариант племенной организации. *Африка: история, историография*. Отв. ред. С.Ю. Абрамова. М.: Наука, 4–24.
- Попов В.А. 1990. *Этносоциальная история аканов в XVI–XIX веках. Проблемы генезиса и стадияльно-формационного развития этнополитических организмов*. М.: Наука. Главная редакция восточной литературы.
- Попов В.А. 1995. Политогенетическая контроверза, парapolитейность и феномен вторичной государственности. *Ранние формы политической организации: от первобытности к государственности*. Отв. ред. В.А. Попов. М.: Восточная литература, 188–204.
- Попов В.А. 2004. Потестарно-политические факторы этногенеза. *Радловские чтения — 2004. Тезисы докладов*. СПб.: Музей антропологии и этнографии имени Петра Великого (Кунсткамера) РАН, 53–54.
- Попов В.А. 2010. О корреляции этногенетических и политогенетических процессов, или потестарность как модус этногенеза. *III Российский культурологический конгресс с международным участием «Креативность в пространстве традиции и инновации»*. Тезисы докладов и сообщений. 27–29 октября 2010 года. СПб.: Эйдос, 41.
- Попов В.А. 2014. *Алгебра родства и власти. Исследования по антропологии родства и политической антропологии*. М.; СПб.: Институт Африки РАН, АНО «Центр информатизации образования “КИО”».
- Попов 2014а. Первобытное общество. *Новая Российская энциклопедия*, т. 12 (2). М.: Энциклопедия, Инфра-М, 434–436.
- Попов В.А. 2014б. Племя. *Большая Российская энциклопедия*, т. 26. М.: Большая Российская энциклопедия, 401.
- Попов В.А. 2015. Концепт «племя», или этничность и потестарность «в одном флаконе». *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana*, № 2, 14–25.
- Попов В.А. 2019. Феномен вторичного политогенеза и парapolитейность в предколониальной Африке. *Политогенез и историческая динамика политических институтов: от локальной потестарности к глобальной мир-системе*. Отв. ред. Л.Е. Гринин. М.: Учитель, 142–157.
- Fried M.H. 1975. *The Notion of Tribe*. Menlo Park (Calif.): Cummings Pub. Co.
- Prins H.E.L. 1985. Tribe. *The Social Science Encyclopedia*. Ed. by A. Kuper, J. Kuper. London, Boston, Henley: Routledge & Kegan Pau, 869.
- Sahlins M.D. 1968. *Tribesmen*. Englewood Cliffs (New Jersey): Prentice-Hall.
- Service E.R. 1971. *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*. 2nd ed. New York: Random House.
- Service E.R. 1975. *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Skalník P. 2004. Chieftdom: A Universal Political Formation? *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, no. 43, 76–98.

Received: 25.06.2025