

# GENDER AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS AMONG BANDS, CHIEFDOMS AND TRIBAL SOCIETIES

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## **Abstract**

*Gender and economic relations have been the crux of debate in economic anthropology. Relationship between men and women in economic nexus appears to have impaired women and subject them to little access to factors of production, which in turn limits women production potentials. Adopting functionalism as the theoretical framework, this study was designed to compare gender and economic relations among bands, chiefdoms and tribal societies. Specifically, the study was designed to examine the subsistence strategies, gendered role patterns and gender gaps in economic relations among these societies. The study found among other things, that egalitarian gender relations exist among these societies. However, differentiation sets in as society becomes stratified and more complex as is the case of the chiefdom. The study concludes that as contact increased and societies become more centralized, the egalitarian structure begins to decrease.*

**Key Words:** *Gender and economic relations, bands, chiefdoms, tribal societies, gender roles*

## **Introduction**

Gender relations especially in economic activities have been the nitty-gritty of underdevelopment and poverty in many societies. Relationship between men and women in economic nexus impaired women and subjected them to little access to factors of production which in turn limits women production potentials. This further endangers women economic growth. For instance, United Nations Development Programme (2018) sees gender inequality as one of the highest obstacles to human development.

The difficulties facing women and girls are foremost source of inequality and one of the greatest barriers to human development progress. The gender gap is widest in low human development countries where the average HDI value is 13.8 percent lower for women than for men (UNDP, 2018). In this paper, the consciously delimited aim is to compare gender and economic relations among band societies, tribal or non-state societies and chiefdoms. The study sets to understand the prevalent subsistence strategies and gendered patterns of economic relations. It pays attention to gendered gaps in economic relations. Furthermore, the study tracks changes and factors responsible in gender and economic relations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts functionalism as the theoretical framework. The proponents of this theory as used here are Emile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowski (Ezeh, 2010). Functionalists believe that society is made up of a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain the smooth operation of society. Functionalists argue that it is quite useful to have men and women fulfil different roles in societies. The society is more efficient when tasks and responsibilities are allocated to particular individuals who were socialized to fulfil specific roles.

Talcott Parsons and Robert Bale (Tischler, 2011) applied functionalist theory to the modern societies. They argue that the division of labour and role differentiation by gender are universal principles of society organization and are functional to the society. They believe that the society functions best when the males assume the instrumental role which focuses on relationship between the immediate society and the outside world while mother concentrates her energies on the expressive role which focuses on relationship within the family and requires her to provide the love and emotional support needed to sustain the family.

### **Anthropology and Societies: A Brief Overview**

Anthropological studies have found varying social structures across the world. Among these societies are bands, tribal and chiefdoms. Band societies are small, loosely organized groups of people that tend to be politically autonomous and function with minimal leadership (Kottak, 2008). People in most foraging societies live in monogamous, nuclear households. Family size is limited among foragers because of requirement not to exceed the carrying capacities of local environments (Ember, Ember & Peregrine, 2007; Kottak, 2008; Haviland et al., 2008).

Here, a non-state society (tribal) is used to refer to societies with a wide range of economic modes and political organizations. They include groups whose subsistence is based on foraging, farming, horticulture, and/or pastoralism (Schultz, Lavead & Dods, 2009).

Chiefdoms are characterized by systems of social stratification. Social relations among individuals and kinship groups are not founded on egalitarian principles but on hierarchical ranking of people. The degree of segmentation and strength of hierarchy vary cross-culturally. Chiefdom mode of subsistence is based on mixture of foraging, farming, horticulture, and/or pastoralism (Ember et al., 2007; Haviland et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2009).

### **Gendered Patterns of Economic Relations**

The !Kung of Southern Africa and the Inuit of the North American Arctic are described as societies with band structure. Anthropologists like Lee have been doing long-term fieldwork among the !Kung and Damas and d'Anglure, among the Arctic. Lee (1984/2003) reports that among the !Kung, subsistence activities are allocated by gender division of labour, although assignment of tasks is not rigid. In general, women collect natural vegetation, including more than 100 edible varieties of plants, roots, fruits and nuts. In all, vegetable foods account for approximately 70 per cent of the !Kung diet. Mongongo nuts are among the most prized foods and are available year-round from trees growing near waterholes. According to Lee's calculations based on extensive observation of subsistence activities, !Kung women spend 12 to 13 hours per week foraging. Lee (1984/2003) further reports that men also engage in gathering wild foods, although their allocation of time and energy to this endeavour is much less than that of women. Men provide approximately 20 per cent of gathered foods. Lee states that men's primary subsistence task is hunting and estimates that the !Kung spend 21 to 22 hours per week in subsistence activities.

Unlike the environment in which the !Kung live, the Arctic regions of Canada and the United States present inhabitants with enormous difficulties. Resources are scarce and weather conditions often make subsistence activities hazardous (Damas, 1984). Because of environmental and resource constraints, settlements are small. In general, men are responsible for hunting and fishing, and women engage in food preparation and gathering available foods such as berries, algae and birds' eggs. Women are also responsible for childcare and for sewing, including making clothing, boots, boat cover and containers. Cooperative labour of men and women occurs in inland communities during caribou drives. Women and men also do fishing. Among coastal groups, women often engage in hunting, fishing and catching birds near their settlements (d'Anglure, 1984; Damas, 1984; Ember et al., 2007; Haviland et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2009). In some communities, each individual makes the tools and utensils that she or he uses, where as in others, men are the primary producers of equipment. It is the further report of (d'Anglure, 1984) that among some Arctic peoples, daughters may be trained by their fathers to become hunters. If a father especially prefers his daughter or if he has no son, a daughter may accompany her father on hunting expeditions and learn all the requisite skills. There is also emphasis on the collective labour among men in coastal communities.

The Navajo of South-western North America, the Nuer of Sudan, the Luo of Kenya, the Iroquois of North-eastern North America, the Jivaro of Peru and the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria are among the societies classified as tribal or non-state societies. Many classic ethnographies have also been recorded among these groups. Kluckhohn and Leighton (1962) recorded that among the Navajo, control of land was vested in matrilineal clans that allocated their territory to extended family unit or outfits as they have been called.

Sheepherding combined with horticulture is of economic importance. Both men and women individually owned sheep. They noted that in the context of Navajo economic pursuits, gender constructs essentially validate the equality and autonomy of women and men. Although a gender-based division of labour was idealized, actual behaviour was little constrained by it. Both men and women worked in farming and sheepherding. Women usually performed domestic tasks, but men engaged in food preparation when necessary. Childcare too was primarily a concern for women but men also attended to their children's needs and gave them a great deal of emotional support. Besides, among the Navajo, both women and men are independent owners of sheep and retain their distinctive control regardless of age or marital status. Even though accumulation of wealth and rank according to wealth became important components in the Navajo social order, gender was never a segmenting factor in the system.

Among the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard (1951) recorded that subsistence modes combine cattle herding and horticulture. However, despite the substantial contribution of grains to their diet, Nuer ideology stresses the dependence of people on their cattle. Cattle are an important source of food for the Nuer. An economic division of labour rigidly allocates tasks to men and women among the Nuer. Cattle herding is the job of men and boys who have undergone ritual initiation into adulthood usually at about age 15. In addition, man's productive roles include fishing and hunting. Women, girls and uninitiated boys are not allowed to take cattle to grazing lands. Instead, they are responsible for milking the animals, a task performed twice a day. Women also tend gardens, principally growing millet and maize just as they are responsible for childcare and domestic tasks (Evans-Pritchard, 1951; Ember et al., 2007; Haviland et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2009).

Lao subsistence was based on a mixture of cattle herding and farming, although like the Nuer, cattle pastoralism dominated their activities and their ideology. Okeyo (1980) records that land for farming and grazing, was held by kinship groups organized into patrilineages. Lineages allocated land for use to men within the group. Men then allotted land-use rights to their wives and sons. Therefore, men received land rights by membership in patrilineages while women obtained land through marriage. However, once a woman received land for use, she controlled the production and distribution of crops resulting from her labour.

Iroquoian economies were based on horticulture, centred on production of maize, beans and squash. When new fields were needed, men prepared them for planting. Women performed all other farming work including planting and tending crops. Women also did most of the harvesting although men occasionally helped in this activity. In addition, women gathered wild foods including a wide assortment of fruits, nut and roots. Finally, they were responsible for domestic tasks and childcare. Men's subsistence roles included

hunting and fishing to supplement the basic plant diet and trading with other native peoples for animal skins (Lafitau, 1974; Abler, 2004).

Among the Jivaro, Meggers (1971) recounts that women contributed substantially to their households. They are responsible for planting, tending and harvesting crops notably manioc, sweet potatoes and squash. These products supply most of the Jivaro's subsistence needs, although they are supplemented by fish and animal meat provided by men. Jivaro women also control and perform garden rituals that must be enacted to ensure a good crop. Women are believed to have a special relationship with plants. Jivaro culture thus endows women with a critical role linking subsistence to the supernatural realm. Women are significantly responsible not only for ensuring success in their own productive activities but their ritual knowledge is also necessary for men's success in hunting (Meggers, 1971; Ember et al., 2007; Schultz et al., 2009).

The Igbo of Eastern Nigeria can be described as polystructural society. Much ethnography has been done among the Igbo but lack consensus as a result of this polystructure. Ottenberg (1968) records that as other Igbo, Afikpo subsistence is based on horticulture. Tasks are strongly demarcated according to gender. Men plant yams, considered the staple crop. Rice, a recently introduced product, is the only plant grown by both men and women; women plant and harvest all other crops including manioc, cocoyam, maize and okra. Even when work has a collective focus, tasks are demarcated according to gender. For example, men harvest yams, but women and children carry the yams to the household yam barn. Other subsistence and household activities in Afikpo are likewise allocated according to gender. Men make bamboo frames for Afikpo houses, women collect and carry mud for house walls. Men obtain fish from nearby rivers, women fish in ponds and streams. Men put on the frames, women smoothen it when dry. Gender differentiation extends to crafts, women are potters, men make mats (Ottenberg, 1968). In addition to their direct farming activities, women are responsible for processing crops once harvested, preparing meals, carrying loads and caring for children.

Green (1964) recorded that among the Umueke Agbaja Igbo, subsistence strategy was based on farming and market exchange. Land for farming was held by kinship groups organized into patrilineages. Lineages allocated land for use to men within the group. Men then allotted land-use rights to their wives and sons. Therefore, men received land rights by membership in patrilineages while women obtained land through marriage. However, once a woman received land for use, she controlled the production and distribution of crops resulting from her labour. Umueke Agbaja subsistence strategy was based on agriculture. When new fields were needed, men prepared them for planting. Women performed all other farming work including planting and tending crops. Women also did most of the harvesting of crops, except yam, although men occasionally helped in

the activity. In addition, women gathered wild foods including a wide assortment of fruits, nuts and roots. Finally, both men and women were responsible for domestic tasks and childcare. Men's subsistence roles included hunting and fishing to supplement the basic plant diet and trading with other native peoples for farm produce.

The Haida and Tlingit of the Canadian Pacific Coast and the Kpelle of Liberia are among the societies normally referred to as chiefdoms. Among the Haida and Tlingit, men and women both had productive economic roles. Men fished and hunted and women gathered plant and marine resources. Women had important decision-making rights in economic distribution within the households and in intergroup trade. They participated with men in planning and hosting family and ceremonial potlatches which validated and increased the status of their kin groups. Blackman (1982) reports among the Haida and Tlingit that both men and women benefited from potlatches in numerous ways. They receive gifts as guests and could function as hosts. Many types of potlatches were given by either gender category.

On another development, Kpelle economy is based on farming, providing both food for subsistence and surplus sold for cash income. Rice is the most important crop, although a wide variety of other foods is grown including manioc, yams, okra, bananas, citrus fruits and peanuts. Some phases of farming are joint activities of men and women and others are gender-linked. Men cut down trees in fields in preparation for planting. Then women and men clear the fields of undergrowth. Men and women engage in farming, although the crops produced are distinct. Men are responsible for producing rice, supplies of other foods are in the women's domain and are obtained by their labour (Gibbs, 1965; Schultz et al., 2009; Ember et al., 2007; Haviland et al., 2008).

### **Gendered Gap in Economic Relations**

The !Kung, a San-speaking people of Botswana and Namibia, provide an example of a foraging band society where equality between women and men is manifested in many cultural practices and beliefs. Disparities between women and men in time allotted to food collecting are equalized by differences in other kinds of labour as women are more often engaged in food preparation and other household duties. Although men expended more time and energy in subsistence work than women did, (Lee, 1984/2003) their contribution to total caloric intake is less. Women's greater productivity despite less time-expended results from the fact that men's success rate in hunting is appreciably lower than women's success rate in food collecting.

Lee (1984/2003) reports that both men and women of !Kung have equal rights. This equality manifests on sexual behaviour before, during and outside marriage. Lee notes that another lack of evidence of male dominance is that physical violence against women

in the form of wife beating and rape is rare. The latter in fact is often reported to be entirely absent. The former, though it occurs occasionally, is socially condemned. The !Kung culture of equality is supported by subsistence activities of women and men, both of whom make vital contributions to their households. Although their economic roles are normatively different, there is actual flexibility in an individual's behaviour. The constellation of behaviours and attitudes that !Kung culture prefers, supports equality and autonomy for its members, regardless of gender or of any other principle of social categorization (Lee, 2003/2013; Barnard, 2007).

d'Anglure (1984) reports that male dominance among Arctic peoples is tempered by several practices. First, though residence pattern tends to favour patrilineal bonds, couples typically begin married life residing with the wife's kin. They may remain there until several children are born and the marriage is assumed stable. Second, attitudes toward premarital sexual activities are equally permissive concerning girls and boys. Although there is some pressure for an unwed to marry her child's father, it is not intense. Third, flexibility in subsistence activities also lessens tendencies for male dominance because it publicly recognizes the fact that tasks can be performed equally well by either women or men. Women's participation in hunting and fishing demonstrates their productive contributions to their households. Fourth, decision making tends to involve people who are directly concerned in the focal activity. Men make decisions regarding their tasks and women do likewise. Although, men's opinion carries more weight, in decisions involving movement or settlements. Final factor is that absence of warfare in Arctic communities may mitigate male dominance. In sum, Arctic cultures manifest tendencies toward male dominance but they also contain support for egalitarian gender relations (d'Anglure, 1984).

Witherspoon (1975) reports that the underlying egalitarian nature of Navajo society remained strong, despite the economic and political changes of the nineteenth century. Gender roles were differentiated in some endeavours but overlap was also characteristic of actual behaviour. Balance between women and men were enacted on a daily basis in the work people performed and in the quality of their social interactions. Although egalitarian gender relations among the Navajo have continued to persist, recent economic transformations have altered productive roles and contributions of women and men to their households. Household composition itself has changed in many areas of the Navajo nation (Witherspoon, 1975).

Evans-Pritchard (1951) explains that male dominance among the Nuer is demonstrated in attitudes and behaviours that give greater social value to men than to women. Men and women's relationship to cattle is a significant reflection of ideological value accorded to the gender categories. In the context of Nuer subsistence, women's work with the cattle is directly productive because they are responsible for milking the cows. Nevertheless, it is

men who are symbolically linked to cattle and who perform the socially prestigious work associated with their care and survival. In addition, men are the owners of cattle; they make decisions concerning their use and distribution, they employ cattle in exchanges for marriage, payment of debts, and on ceremonial occasions.

Okeyo (1980) records that land for farming and grazing, was held by kinship groups organized into patrilineages. Lineages allocated land for use to men within the group. Besides, the basic economic unit of husband and wife was essentially cooperative. Despite male control over kinship relations, preferences for patrilocal residence and inheritance of land use rights through men, Luo women had some degree of independence and autonomy due to their substantial contribution to household subsistence and their control over distribution of crops. Their rights to land and the social recognition of their productive labour in supporting heirs to patrilineages gave women a more important social position than experienced by other pastoral peoples such as the Nuer (Okeyo, 1980).

Among the Iroquois, Lafitau (1974) records that in general, traditional norms sanctioned equality and autonomy of women and men. All people had rights to make decisions concerning their activities. No individual had rights to impose his or her will on others. The division of labour among Iroquoians therefore separated tasks of men and women. Each contributed resources and goods through their labour. Men and women in a household performed complementary tasks, all necessary for the functioning and survival of the group. Contributions of both women and men were highly valued. Their works were socially recognized and rewarded (Lafitau, 1974; Abler, 2004).

Among the Jivaro, Meggers (1971) recounts, that women contributed substantially to their households. They are responsible for planting, tending, and harvesting crops notably manioc, sweet potatoes and squash. These products supply most of the Jivaro's subsistence needs, although they are supplemented by fish and animal meat provided by men. Jivaro women also control and perform garden rituals that must be enacted to ensure a good crop. Women are believed to have a special relationship with plants. Jivaro culture thus endows women with a critical role linking subsistence to the supernatural realm. Women are significantly responsible not only for ensuring success in their own productive activities but their ritual knowledge is also necessary for men's success in hunting (Meggers, 1971).

Among the Igbo, an important feature of the economy is the reliance on market trades conducted primarily by women. Women's control over local trade is a key to their ability to establish a high degree of independence and autonomy. Women sell farm produce and handicrafts in town and regional markets to others who buy goods for their own households or who buy for resale to local villagers. Some women are able to make sizeable profits in these exchanges. Through their control over market activities and the money they receive



through trade, women establish independence in their household. Data from Afikpo Igbo provide insights into relationships between trading activities and social status (Gittenberg, 1968).

Green (1964) records that among the Umueke, Agbaja Igbo, women wielded much power because of the role they play in the economic and family life. Among this group, women are the chief breadwinners. Although the men contribute, the women contribute the greater share of the normal family food, buying also other food items like salt with their money. Furthermore, women have many sources of income which include selling kacha, trading on tobacco and sometimes, selling of fowls. They also sell surplus farm produce to get money. Their role in the economy and household put them on advantage over men who admit normally that the women feed them. Based on this, women can deny men food to bring them to order when they misbehave. Most of the time, the caring of children is left for the men when women are out for market engagements. Green (1964, 171) states that 'the fathers of the small children would often be found left in charge while the mother was at the market'

Green (1964) records that even when the women kill the livestock of men found eating their crop, men would not take any court action because women will always win. The men believe that women own them and would always defend any killing. The only option is to take your killed livestock before the women eat it up. Green (1964) states that occasionally men would use humour to complain of the women dominance. She says:

The men would tell the women that they took unfair advantage of them when a male child was born by holding it upside down so that its head touched the ground or by putting a foot on its face to show their dominance (p. 176).

Unlike Iroquoian culture which thoroughly supports gender equality in ideological and material forms, Igbo culture conveys mixed messages. Male dominance is verbalized and enacted through contrasting demeanours of men and women and through some restrictions on women's participation. However, individual women are able to assert their independence through their critical control over economic exchange.

Chiefdoms are characterized by systems of social stratification. Social relations among individuals and kinship groups are not founded on egalitarian principles but on hierarchical ranking of people. The degree of segmentation and strength of hierarchy vary cross-culturally. Blackman (1982) reports among the Haida and Tlingit, that both men and women benefited from potlatches in numerous ways. They receive gifts as guests and could function as hosts. Many types of potlatches were given by either gender category. In

addition, gender equality in the potlatch system was demonstrated by the fact that sons and daughters were equally recognized through feasts given by their parents. A son or daughter's birth, naming, puberty, marriage and other accomplishments were celebrated publicly.

Even though Tlingit and Haida cultural constructs validated the equality of women and men, women are socialized to be somewhat deferential toward their husbands. Wives were expected to respect their husbands in daily activities. Women owned property and had recognized rights to dispose of it as they chose. A woman's property remained her own after marriage and did not merge with that of her husband's. The principle of individual control of goods and houses worked against women, though in the event of divorce or the death of husbands (Blackman, 1982; Ember et al., 2007; Haviland et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2009). Pacific coast cultures conveyed complex messages about women's and men's status and authority. In some domains, separation of tasks and rights were clearly demarcated. Subsistence activities were allocated according to gender, rights to inheritance of property were differentiated so that women inherited goods from their mothers and men inherited property and titles from their Mother's Brothers (MBs). However, egalitarian valuation of women and men was a prevailing principle and led to the essential independence and autonomy of both (Blackman, 1982). However, a turn to the Kpelle shows that gender constructs support the "belief in the formal superiority of men over women" (Gibbs, 1965, p. 230). Nevertheless, examination of the roles and rights of women and men reveals that women make significant recognized contributions to their families and have both economic and social independence despite the public control exercised by men. Moreover, Gibbs (1965) reports that a couple farms on land allotted to men as heads of households within patrilineages. Land controlled by patrilineages is awarded to men as the last link in a chain of hierarchical jurisdiction because all Kpelle land are said to be owned by paramount chiefs, each of whom controls his own territory. Although men are the holders of land-use rights, women have a great deal of control over the produce of the land. They make decisions about which crops to grow and in what amount. In addition, women determine the planting of other crops on acreage allotted to them by their husbands. 'They have complete control over the income from these individual posts' (p. 201).

In summary, variations in gender constructs are linked to participation in household economies and in community affairs. Among the Haida and Tlingit women had important decision-making rights in economic distribution within the households and in intergroup trade. They participated with men in planning and hosting family and ceremonial potlatches which validated and increased the status of their kin groups. Women's equality and autonomy were therefore manifested in critical spheres of social life. Among the Kpelle, ideological and religious precepts stress men's superiority but women maintain

some autonomy and rights to decision making because of their productive farming role and their control over other produce of their labour.

### **Changing Gender and Economic Relations: Causative Factors**

Modernization and globalization have been seen as the factors that cause changes in gender and economic relations among the world's cultures. Every other factor is subsumed under these. For example, modernization brings systematic, predictable changes in gender roles. The impact of modernization operates in two key phases: one, industrialization brings women into the paid workforce and dramatically induces migration in search for industrial works (Ember, Ember & Skoggard, 2004; Waldman, 2005). Women attain literacy and greater educational opportunities. Women are enfranchised and begin to participate in representative government. Two, the post-industrial phase brings a shift toward greater gender equality as women rise in management and the professions and gain political influence within elected and appointed bodies. Over half of the world has not yet entered this phase; only the more advanced industrial societies are currently moving on this trajectory (Inglehart & Pippa, 2003; Carrier, 2005; Hann & Hart, 2011).

According to Inglehart and Pippa (2003), an extensive literature in demography, sociology, anthropology and social psychology has documented the familiar yet profound transformation of sex roles associated with the process of societal modernization. One, virtually all preindustrial societies emphasize childbearing and child rearing as the central goal for women and their most important function in life, along with tasks like food production and preparation at home; jobs in the paid workforce are predominately male. In post-industrial societies, gender roles have increasingly converged because of a structural revolution in the paid labour force, in educational opportunities for women and in the characteristics of modern families. Two, in most affluent countries, people are marrying later than in previous generations and having fewer children.

Three, a rapid increase in premarital cohabitation is challenging the once-privileged position held by marriage. More and more women especially those who are married have entered the paid labour force creating the transition from male breadwinner to dual-earning families. Four, although the gender gap in rates of economic participation is narrowing, women's and men's roles in the labour force continue to differ. Women still have to juggle the demands of family responsibilities and market work and they hold different jobs than men do, often with lower status and rewards. These social trends raise questions about long-established moral values and attitudes toward the family and gender roles that were once taken for granted. Traditional family values have by no means disappeared but they appear to be under greater strain in postmodern societies.

### Conclusion

Gender and economic relations have taken multidisciplinary perspectives. From anthropological literature, this study investigates ethnologically, gender and economic relations among band societies, tribal societies and chiefdoms. The study started by briefly explaining these societies from anthropological outlook. We observe that gender and economic relations followed egalitarian nature among the band. The values attached to subsistence activities are complementary and as such, contribution of each gender category is valued. Among the band, we also observe that there is no marked differentiation and accumulation of wealth is by no means a necessary ideology. Every day, they forage for their needs. This has also led to the title of original affluent society (Barnard, 2007).

Likewise, with sedentary subsistence strategy, social differentiation began and relative valuation of the major factor of production. With men in control of land, it is reasoned that women are subjugated. However, there is level of egalitarianism inwardly. This is so because, there is still valuation on the relative contribution of each gender category.

However, with stratification as marked by chiefdom, inequality began to set in albeit minimally. With accumulation and centralization of resources, we observe that polarity between the gender categories percolate. Therefore, unequal gender and economic relations evolved as human master actively the laws governing nature. The study however recommends a further comparison to accommodate state societies especially industrial societies.

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