

Six

Sharp's classic description of the introduction of the steel axe among the Yir Yoront of Australia (Sharp 1952) stands out as an illuminating case-study of social change precisely because it adopts this perspective. It provides an understanding of change by explaining the changing bases from which people make their allocations. We see how Yir Yoront women no longer need to offer as much submission to their husbands because they no longer need to go to them to obtain an axe; we understand why people no longer allocate time and resources to intertribal festivals because they are no longer dependent on them to obtain their tools.

This way of isolating the underlying determinants of social forms, so as to see how changes in them generate changing social systems, implies a view of behavior and society that is rather different from what has frequently been adopted in anthropology. What we see as a social form is, concretely, a pattern of distribution of behavior by different persons and on different occasions. I would argue that it is not useful to assume that this empirical pattern is a sought-for condition, which all members of the community equally value and willfully maintain. Rather, it must be regarded as an epiphenomenon of a great variety of processes in combination, and our problem as social anthropologists is to show how it is generated. The determinants of the form must be of a variety of kinds. On the one hand, what persons

wish to achieve, the multifarious ends they are pursuing, will channel their behavior.