

## CHAPTER 7

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# POLITICAL SYSTEMS

### I. Introduction

#### A. Politics

1. *Power* is the ability to exercise one's will over others.
2. Authority is the socially approved use of power.
3. In 1962, Elman Service developed a typology of political organizations.
  - a. *Bands* are small kin-based groups found among foragers.
  - b. *Tribes* are associated with nonintensive food production and have villages and/or descent groups, but lack formal government and social classes.
  - c. The chiefdom is a form of sociopolitical organization that is intermediate between the tribe and the state, still kin-based, but characterized by a permanent political structure with some degree of differential access to resources and a political structure.
  - d. The state is characterized by formal government and social classes.
4. In bands and tribes, the political order (polity) is not a distinct institution, but is embedded in the overall social order.
5. Because of this embeddedness, we prefer to speak of *sociopolitical* (rather than simply political) organization in discussing cross-cultural similarities and differences in the regulation or management of interrelations among groups and their representatives.

#### B. Types and Trends

1. There are many correlations between economy and sociopolitical organization.
  - a. Foragers tend to have band organization.
  - b. Horticulturalists and pastoralists tend to have tribal organization.
  - c. Agriculturalists tend to have either chiefdom-level or state-level organization.
2. In general, as the economy becomes more productive, population size increases leading to greater regulatory problems, which give rise to more complex social relations and linkages (greater social and political complexity).

## **II. Bands and Tribes**

### **A. Foraging Bands**

1. In foraging societies the only two social groups that are significant are the nuclear family and the band.

a. Membership in these groups is fluid and can change from year to year.

b. Kin networks, both real and fictive, are created and maintained through marriage, trade, and visiting.

2. Foraging bands are egalitarian, in that all differences in status are achieved.

3. Foragers lack formal law as conflict resolution is embedded in kinship and social ties (e.g., blood feuds).

4. Prestige refers to esteem, respect, or approval for culturally valued acts or qualities.

### **C. Tribal Cultivators**

1. Tribes usually have a horticultural or pastoral economy and are organized by village life and/or descent-group membership.

2. Social classes and formal government are not found in tribes.

3. Small-scale warfare or intervillage raiding is commonly found in tribes.

4. The main regulatory officials are village heads, "big men," descent-group leaders, village councils, and leaders of pantribal associations.

a. The officials have limited authority.

b. They lead through persuasion and by example, not through coercion.

5. Like foragers, tribes are egalitarian.

a. Tribes often have marked gender stratification.

b. Status in tribes is based on age, gender, and personal traits and abilities.

6. Horticulturalists are egalitarian and tend to live in small villages with low population density.

### **D. The Village Head**

1. The position of village head is achieved and comes with very limited authority.

- a. He cannot force or coerce people to do things.
  - b. He can only persuade, harangue, and try to influence people to do things.
2. The village head acts as a mediator in disputes, but he has no authority to back his decision or impose punishments.
  3. The village head must lead in generosity.
- a. He must be most generous, which means he must cultivate more land.
  - b. He hosts feasts for other villages.

### **E. The "Big Man"**

1. A big man is like a village head, except that his authority is regional in that he may have influence over more than one village.
  2. The big man is common to the South Pacific.
  3. Among the Kapauku, the big man is the only political figure beyond the household.
- a. The position is achieved through generosity, eloquence, bravery, physical fitness, and supernatural powers.
  - b. His decisions are binding among his followers.
  - c. He is an important regulator of regional events (e.g., feasts and markets).
4. In order to be a tribal leader, a big man, or village head, a person must be generous.
    - a. They must work hard to create a surplus to give away.
    - b. This surplus is converted into prestige.
  5. The big man is a temporary regional regulator who can mobilize supporters from several villages for produce and labor on specific occasions.

### **F. Pantribal Sodalities and Age Grades**

1. Sodalities are non-kin-based organizations that may generate cross-societal linkages.
- a. They are often based on common age or gender.
  - b. Some sodalities are confined to a single village.
  - c. Some sodalities span several villages; these are called pantribal sodalities.

2. Pantribal sodalities tend to be found in areas where two or more different cultures come into regular contact.

a. Especially in situations where warfare is frequent.

b. Since pantribal sodalities draw their members from several villages, they can mobilize a large number of men for raids.

3. Pressure from European contact created conditions which promoted pantribal sodalities (age sets are one example) among the groups of the North American Great Plains of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

4. Age sets are sodalities that include all of the men born during a certain time span.

a. Similar to a cohort of class of students, like the class of 2004.

b. Members of an age set progress through a series of age grades together (e.g., initiated youth, warrior, adult, elder, or in American universities: freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate).

5. Secret societies are sodalities with secret initiation ceremonies.

6. Sodalities create nonkin linkages between people based on age, gender, and ritual and create a sense of ethnic identity and belonging to the same cultural tradition.

## **G. Nomadic Politics**

1. Nomads must interact with a variety of groups, unlike most sedentary societies.

2. Powerful chiefs are commonly found in nomadic groups that have large populations (e.g., the Basseri and the Qashqai of southern Iran).

3. The Basseri have a smaller population and their chief, *khan*, is similar to a village head or big man.

a. The position is achieved.

b. Allegiances are with the person, not the office.

4. The larger Qashqai have multiple levels of authority and more powerful chiefs.

a. Their authority can be more coercive.

b. Allegiances are with the office, not the person.

### **III. Chiefdoms**

#### **A. Chiefdoms and States**

1. Chiefdoms are a transitional form of sociopolitical organization between tribes and states.

2. Carneiro (1970) defines the state as "an autonomous political unit encompassing many communities within its territory, having a centralized government with the power to collect taxes, draft men for work or war, and decree and enforce laws."

a. Archaic or nonindustrial states

b. Industrial or modern states

#### **B. Political and Economic Systems in Chiefdoms**

1. Unlike band and tribal political systems, chiefdoms and states are permanent: their offices outlast the individuals who occupy them.

2. An office is a permanent position of authority that exists independently of the person who occupies it.

a. It must be refilled when it is vacated.

b. Offices ensure that the sociopolitical organization endures across generations.

3. Chiefs play an important role in the production, distribution, and consumption of resources.

a. Chiefs collect foodstuffs as tribute (upward movement).

b. Chiefs later redistribute these collected foodstuffs at feasts (downward movement).

#### **C. Social Status in Chiefdoms**

1. In chiefdoms, social status is based on seniority of descent.

2. All of the people in a chiefdom are believed to have descended from a group of common ancestors.

a. The closer you and your lineage are related to those founding ancestors, the greater your prestige.

b. In chiefdoms, there is a continuum of prestige with the chief at one end and the lowest ranking individuals at the other.

c. The chief must demonstrate his seniority of descent.

3. Chiefdoms lack social classes.

#### **D. Status Systems in Chiefdoms and States**

1. Unlike tribal and band organizations, there are systemic status distinctions in chiefly and state societies.

2. State and chiefdom status systems are based upon differential access to wealth and resources, and differential allocation of rights and duties.

a. States are characterized by much clearer class divisions than chiefdoms, typically associated with *stratum endogamy*.

b. The result of stratum endogamy is social stratification, the hierarchical arrangement of unrelated classes.

c. Social stratification, social classes, is one of the key distinguishing features of states.