Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa

Recent critiques of neo-evolutionary formulations that focus primarily on the development of powerful hierarchies have called for a broadening of the empirical base for complex society studies. Redressing the neglect of sub-Saharan examples in comparative discussions on complex society, this book considers how case material from the subcontinent can enhance our understanding of the nature, origins, and development of complexity. The archaeological, historical, and anthropological case materials are relevant to a number of recent concerns, revealing how complexity has emerged and developed in a variety of ways. Contributors engage important theoretical issues, including the continuing influence of deeply embedded evolutionary notions in archaeological conceptions of complexity, the importance of alternative modes of complex organization – such as flexible hierarchies, multiple overlapping hierarchies, and horizontal differentiation – and the significance of different forms of power. The distinguished list of contributors includes historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists.

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Beyond Chiefdoms

Pathways to Complexity in Africa

Edited by
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Preface

This book project had its origins in my own frustration at the paucity of African models, African-inspired theories, and African case studies in the archaeological literature on the development of complexity. When Antonio Gilman asked me to organize an archaeology session at the 1992 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco, I used the opportunity to showcase what that continent has to offer to ongoing debates about the origin and nature of complex societies. If archaeology was to live up to its claims to be a comparative discipline, it needed to take Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, seriously and systematically into account.

The papers at the invited session entitled “Intermediate-level Societies in Africa: Archaeological and Anthropological Insights” ranged widely over the continent and included presentations by anthropologists and historians as well as archaeologists. A number of the papers in this volume (those by Southall, S. McIntosh, Schoenbrun, Robertshaw, and Denbow) were originally presented at this session. Igor Kopytoff was also scheduled to participate, but circumstances prevented it. Fekri Hassan participated in the session, but in view of the strongly sub-Saharan focus of the rest of the papers, it was decided to strengthen that focus for publication and exclude ancient Egypt – arguably the best-known African complex society. Subsequently, papers presented by Ann Stahl and Nic David at the Complex Society Group’s meeting in San Bernardino in October 1995 were added, and additional papers solicited. Not all of the additionally solicited papers actually materialized, leaving the coverage of some themes and areas envisioned for inclusion rather threadbare. But even in ideal circumstances, it is unlikely that any group of twelve authors could adequately represent the various regions of a subcontinent two to three times larger than the contiguous United States, let alone satisfy everyone’s wish list for gender, national, ethnic, and disciplinary diversity among the contributors. In the end, it seemed enough to provide some sense of the variety of anthropological, historical, and archaeological case materials available for the study of complexity in Africa, selected with an eye to their resonance with certain themes that have emerged in the recent archaeological literature.

I am indebted to all the people who read part or all of my introductory essay in preliminary or more advanced draft and provided useful, encouraging and/or cautionary remarks: Nic David, Brian Fagan, Antonio Gilman, Stephen Houston, Ben Nelson, Simon Ottenberg, Thurstan Shaw, Aidan Southall, and Ann Stahl. My debt is particularly large to those stalwart individuals who read through more than one draft version: Tim Earle, Igor Kopytoff, Rod McIntosh, Pete Robertshaw, David Schoenbrun, and Jan Vansina. Although I have not patched all the holes that they found, I am deeply grateful for the collegiality, insightful comments and editorial surveillance. The chapter was significantly improved as a result of their input. Thanks also go to Joe Tainter for long and thought-provoking conversations about complexity along the road between Bandelier and Jemez as well as in Albuquerque.

Four people in particular encouraged me to move ahead with publishing this collection: Ivan Karp (who suggested a more anthropological, rather than archaeological, orientation for the volume, however); Ann Stahl, who uttered just the right words at a critical juncture in
1994; Norman Yoffee, who encouraged me to take the project to Cambridge University Press; and Rod McIntosh, who provided endless support and childcare while I wrestled with the introduction and editorial tasks. I am grateful for their confidence in the project. My children, Alex and Annick, graciously forbore my absences and preoccupation with “the book,” but have made it quite clear that they don’t need another book project in my future any time soon!

More than anything, the completion of this volume is a testimony to my long-time research collaboration with my husband, Rod McIntosh, who first suggested almost two decades ago that standard neo-evolutionary models for the development of complexity did not easily accommodate the massive mound complex of Jenné-jeno, where we began fieldwork together in 1977. In the intervening years, as chiefdom studies were on the ascendant and hierarchy was on everyone’s lips, it seemed quixotic at times to continue to develop the idea that a settlement cluster on the scale of Jenné-jeno was not centrally organized under a paramount chief. Isolated as we were in a department with no other archaeologists, we each served as the other’s major source of support in the belief that alternative models for complex social organization were necessary for archaeology to fulfill its promise as a comparative discipline. Africa’s role in this project would necessarily be a large one, we felt. But the time was not yet right.

With the rise of interest in multiple sources of power (as the influence of Foucault gradually trickles into the mainstream of archaeology) in the 1990s, a more receptive climate for such ideas seems to be emerging. People who work on complex societies far from the traditional areas (Maya, Peru, Europe, Polynesia, Mesopotamia) that have historically dominated discussions on complexity now share a sense that archaeological discourse on complexity has expanded considerably to include a much greater range of variation in patterns and trajectories of complexity. There is a sense, articulated in the title of a session at the 1998 Society for American Archaeology meeting in Seattle, that the discussion of non-hierarchical models of complexity need no longer be conducted in whispers. Perhaps, then, the time is finally right for a book such as this.