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Pathways to complexity: An African perspective

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Over the past decade, sub-Saharan Africa has virtually disappeared from the screen of archaeologists engaged in broadly comparative, theoretical discussions on the emergence of complex society. Prior to the 1980s, the subcontinent was represented with some regularity at important archaeological conferences and discussions on these issues (e.g., Cohen and Service 1978; Friedman and Rowlands 1978; Moore 1974) even while the actual archaeology of sub-Saharan complex societies remained nascent. Since then, the visibility of Africa in comparative theoretical discussions has declined considerably, despite the surge of interest in societies organizationally intermediate between small-scale, non-stratified and locally autonomous groups and the internally differentiated state (e.g., Arnold 1996; Drennan and Uribe 1987; Earle 1987, 1991c; Gregg 1991; Price and Feinman 1995; Upham 1990) and despite the abundance and diversity of such societies throughout the subcontinent at the time of European colonial expansion. Sub-Saharan regions are represented briefly, if at all, in some widely cited works (Earle 1987, 1991c; Ehrenreich et al. 1995; Haas 1982; Price and Feinman 1995; Renfrew and Cherry 1986; Trigger 1993 is a notable exception). Ironically, the archaeology of complex societies in Africa has grown remarkably during this same period (see, e.g., Shaw et al. 1993).

The primary objective of this volume is to reintroduce an African perspective into archaeological theorizing about complex societies. This is a daunting task because the subcontinent is vast (over three times the size of the United States) and in historic times has exhibited an astonishing diversity of sociopolitical formations. Thus, any attempt at general coverage will necessarily suffer from incomplete and unsatisfactory geographic representation, and leave a host of relevant topics and potential insights unexplored. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain themes emerging from the recent archaeological literature that find a particular resonance in the African comparative material. The ongoing effort to broaden archaeology's focus beyond preoccupation with the development of vertical control hierarchies (with the Polynesian chiefdom as prototype) to include less hierarchical, more decentralized or horizontally complex configurations is one such theme (Arnold 1996; Crumley 1987, 1995; Ehrenreich et al. 1995; Nelson 1994; Spielmann 1994). A growing interest in the initial emergence of hierarchy, rather than with its elaboration into more state-like formations is another (Arnold 1996; Price and Feinman 1995; Upham 1990). Related to both of these is the critique of deeply embedded evolutionary notions which continue to subtly influence and shape archaeology's conceptualization of what constitutes complexity, and how it can be identified and studied (Rowlands 1989b; Morris 1997; Yoffee 1993). Emerging from this critique is, again, the growing concern with documenting variability in both the forms and, especially, the developmental trajectories of complexity (e.g., Blanton et al. 1996; Drennan 1996; Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Yoffee 1993). Virtually all the contributors to this volume engage critically with one or more of these issues. The result is, I hope, a persuasive argument for considering Africa central to any and all comparative discussions concerning the diverse forms of and pathways to complexity.

In this chapter I aim to outline in a general manner some of the ways that African case material can contribute to archaeological discussions of these issues. Certain recurrent aspects of African society, such as the co-occurrence of vertical hierarchies with multiple, horizontally arrayed, ritual associations, and particular notions of ritual power and leadership, offer opportunities to reconsider how we think about power and how it is used in crafting polity. I also attempt to reinsert Africa into the evolutionary critiques of the past decade or two. I begin with a brief consideration of why it is that Africa has been absent from the discussion table for so long.

Missing Africa

It is not possible here to tease out all the factors contributing to the neglect of Africa over the past decade even by archaeologists who style their approach as explicitly comparative. However, one can identify several factors that may have played a role. Among these are various

problematic aspects of the African ethnographic litera-
ture. Much of the earlier literature, for example, observed
the state/stateless classification scheme introduced by
Fortes and Evans-Pritchard in *African Political Systems*
(1940). Fortes and Evans-Pritchard focused on the dis-
tinction between stateless (acephalous) societies in which
a system of competing lineage segments provides the
framework of the political structure, and state societies, in
which a centralized administrative organization is
present. The latter category embraced political systems
that in other classifications would range from simple
chiefdoms to early states (as, for example, Taylor's [1975]
classification of sixteen "states" in central, eastern, and
southern Africa as non-ranked, ranked, and paramount
chiefdoms). As archaeology broadened the scope of its
complex society inquiries to focus less on the state and
more on its presumed antecedent formation, the chief-
dom, the task of sifting the vast literature on African
"states" for relevant examples became daunting and was
further complicated by frequent colloquial usage of the
term "chief" for village headship in autonomous villages.
Following Sahlins (1968), Service (1962), and Carneiro
(1981), archaeologists use the term to indicate supralocal
authority. So the fact that the chiefdom, as a separate,
widely used taxonomic category, does not exist for Africa
the way it does for North and South America and
Polynesia, did little to facilitate the inclusion of the con-
tinent in discussions on chiefdom-level societies.

It can be argued that this taxonomic elision is a good
thing, sparing Africanists the endless caviling about the
proper boundary between chiefdom and state that besets
other regions. In this sense, the African "state" corre-
sponds to Johnson and Earle's (1987) "regional polity."
Some argue that the term chiefdom should never be used
in an African context, not only because it is freighted with
unacceptable evolutionary stage implications, but also
because so many chiefdoms in Africa were, like tribes, the
result of colonialism and capitalist penetration (Southall
1988a: 169). Although the terms "tribal" and "tribe" have
been rehabilitated in North America, where they are con-
sidered acceptable when referring to native American
groups, in Africa, the pejorative implications of the terms,
arising from earlier evolutionary and colonial usage, are
still considered offensive (Southall 1970, 1996). As
Southall (1988b: 55) observed, the African counterpart of
"orientalism" is "Africanism," whereby a state in Africa is
always referred to as a tribe (see also Rowlands [1989a:
261–4] on "primitivist" discourses on Africa). The
classificatory dilemmas leave us with "intermediate-level"
or "middle-range" as the least objectionable category for
an enormous diversity of African societies. This suits our

purposes very well, for one point that emerges from
several of the papers in this volume (Kopytoff, David and
Sterner, Vansina) is how easily and fluidly a variety of
African societies move back and forth from lineage to
village headship to regional chiefship and kingship. From
the point of view of process, it is perhaps more useful to
investigate this apparent cycling without a priori subdivi-
sion. In addition, eschewing "chiefdom" liberates us from
the assumptions built into the term, equating complexity
with the emergence of chiefship (i.e., Carneiro's [1981: 45]
definition – following Oberg 1955: 484 – of chiefdoms as
polities united under the permanent control of a para-
mount chief).

In addition to classificatory muddles, the historical
development of theory in African ethnography is another
factor potentially discouraging non-Africanist interest.
The influence of *African Political Systems* can again be
cited. It introduced structural functionalism, which dom-
inated anglophone ethnographic research in Africa for
over two decades. As Earle (1987: 288) has pointed out,
this static and ahistorical perspective offered little to
archaeologists interested in diachronic change and cul-
tural evolution. Furthermore, when a new generation of
ethnographers took advantage of fieldwork opportunities
opening up in Melanesia and attempted to apply African
lineage models, the discovery that African lineages did not
exist elsewhere in the world became, in the words of
Parkin (1990: 184, 196) "wholesale denunciation of the
relevance of African ethnography for other areas and
increasing uninterest in its findings" (but see also Karp
1978). In Melanesia, the creation of exchange as a key
tool for understanding society filled the vacuum left by
the failure of descent theory there (Strathern 1990).
Melanesian exchange studies, coupled with studies of
chiefdoms and social stratification in Polynesia, opened
up a rich theoretical vein for archaeology in the 1960s and
1970s, replete with big man and chief models with a
materialist bent that could plausibly be operationalized in
archaeological terms (e.g., Sahlins 1963). Ironically again,
it was precisely during this period that Africanist anthro-
pology became much more involved with issues of process
and historical change, particularly with regard to African
paramountcies and kingdoms, which were the privileged
focus of post-independence research (e.g., Fallers 1964;
Forde and Kaberry 1967; Goody 1971; Lloyd 1960, 1968,
1971). However, by the 1980s, the Oceanic hegemony in
archaeological theories of intermediate-level societies was
well established, and African societies were discussed
within analytical and classificatory frameworks originally
formulated with Polynesian and Melanesian societies in
mind (e.g., Service 1975). It should be noted, however,

that a number of "non-aligned" (in the sense of not identified with evolutionary, functionalist, materialist, or Marxist paradigms) Africanist anthropologists from Europe and Israel provided discussions of interest in a series of volumes on the early state (e.g., Claessen 1984; papers in Claessen and Skalník 1978, 1981; Claessen and van de Velde 1987; Claessen and Oosten 1996; Eisenstadt et al. 1988b).

Further disincentives to seek theoretical insights from African ethnography were supplied by a burgeoning post-colonial literature that sought to re-situate in the context of wider regional and international economies, politics, and history, societies depicted by ethnographers as isolated and timeless. *Population and Political Systems in Tropical Africa* (Stevenson 1968) is an early example that is frequently cited by non-Africanist archaeologists interested, presumably, in its focus on the functional correlation of population density and political centralization. Targeting Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's (1940) troubling claim that African case studies indicated an inverse correlation between these two variables, Stevenson re-evaluated several of the *African Political Systems* case studies, concluding that the density/centralization anomaly disappeared when historical data were taken into account. High density, acephalous societies such as the Tallensi of Ghana were relics of earlier states, and some low density states, such as the Bemba of Zambia, had higher population densities prior to the arrival of the British, while others, as in the case of the Ngwato, were artifacts of British rule and not indigenous states at all. Although Stevenson's historical methodology was deeply flawed, making many of his conclusions suspect (Goody 1970, 1977; Ottenberg 1970), he laid open for interested archaeologists the problematic nature of ethnographic data from Africa.

The debates on the extent and impact of the slave trade on African societies across the continent further developed the idea that Africa had been fundamentally transformed in recent centuries (e.g., Inikori and Engerman 1992; Lovejoy 1989; Manning 1990; Rodney 1972; Wolf 1982), resulting in social configurations on the eve of colonial conquest that, while genuinely African, were not necessarily "traditional" (examples of in-depth studies of the transformations include Ekholm Friedman 1991; and Harms 1981). The colonial presence altered social formations in yet other ways, creating named, bounded "tribes," altering trade patterns, formalizing informal or contested indigenous hierarchies, promoting local headmen to chiefs, and chiefs to kings in the interests of indirect rule, supported by the ability of the colonial governments to aggregate support through the distribution of "prebends

and benefices" (Fried 1975; Lemarchand 1977: 12; Mamdani 1996: 44–6; Southall 1970, 1996; Stone 1996: 67–8). While it may seem that the African case material represents societies so altered by centuries of contact with powerful, expansionist economic and political systems as to render them of limited use for archaeological theories applicable to periods prior to the emergence of such systems, the recent reinsertion of historical concerns into anthropology makes it clear that the problem is global and not Africa's alone (e.g., Roseberry 1989; Sahlins 1985; Wolf 1982). Africa, Latin America, North America, Polynesia, India, China are all implicated. One cannot label African case material as too problematic and then turn to North America or Polynesia for analogies uncomplicated by history.

Archaeologists, whose interpretations of the past are of necessity based primarily on analogies from the present, have not yet fully appreciated the impact of the breakdown of the concept of timeless, "traditional" society. Various historians, among them Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Vansina (1989, 1990), have demonstrated the truth of Coquery-Vidrovitch's assertion (1976, quoted in Mamdani 1996: 39) that "the static concept of 'traditional society' cannot withstand the historian's analysis." Ann Stahl (1993) has considered the implications for archaeology, pointing out that, even in cases of direct historical continuity with the archaeological case of interest, it is no longer possible simply to assume continuity and persistence between past and present. Earlier practices of uncritical projection into the past accompanied by more or less extensive mapping on of ethnographic details to the archaeological case cannot be sustained. Rather, continuity must be treated as an empirical question requiring investigation by methods that facilitate the identification of change (discontinuity) as well as persistence. With the realization that all ethnographic/ethnohistoric case materials utilized by archaeologists must be subjected to careful source side criticism following rules of evidence established for ethnohistorical, historical, as well as anthropological sources (Vansina 1989; Wood 1990, cited in Stahl 1993: 247), any rationale for particularly avoiding African comparative materials due to their problematic nature disappears.

Whatever the full account of Africa's declining contributions to theory over the past decade may be, my purpose in the remainder of this chapter is to outline the valuable contributions that the sub-continent can make to the theoretical concerns that have emerged in the recent archaeological literature. In drawing on case material for this discussion, I have not followed the prescription for source-side criticism alluded to above. It is simply too

time consuming in view of the wide range of examples discussed. Readers are thus alerted that the literature is taken somewhat at face value in order to make a number of general points.

I suggest that Africa challenges deeply embedded evolutionary notions of complexity as differentiation by political hierarchization and provides an instructive counterpoint to formulations that locate power centrally in individuals and focus analysis primarily on the economic strategies used by these individuals to maintain and expand operational power. It provides a rich corpus of material relevant to an understanding of societies in which central authority, often of a ritual nature, is paired with a power structure that is diffuse, segmentary, and heterarchical, as well as societies in which considerable complexity is achieved through horizontal differentiation and consensus-based decision-making. The distribution of power among several corporate entities (e.g., lineages, secret societies, cults, age grades) can be regarded as a strategy that has successfully resisted in a variety of ways the consolidation of power by individuals. Understanding how and why resistance is effective requires exploration of African ideologies and constructions of power, which in some cases differ significantly from Western notions. Where effective resistance is encountered, is fission the only response to population increase, or can scale increase considerably through the development of other forms of complex organization? To what extent can diverse pathways to complexity be discerned? Rather than taking centralization as a given in discussing complexity and then concentrating on how leaders maintain control through economic leverage or coercion, it is useful to ask what constitutes complexity and consider how social and ritual resources are mobilized and collective action made possible in the absence of significant economic control. Both approaches are of value, although the former has received the lion's share of the attention in the literature to date.

I begin by situating Africa within the critique of the neo-evolutionist narratives of complexity that have dominated (either explicitly or covertly) discussions of complexity, especially among American archaeologists, since the 1960s.

Complexity: narratives and dichotomies

Much of the difficulty with complexity as a subject of archaeological investigation arises from the powerful legacy of nineteenth-century social theorists. As Robert Netting (1990: 21) memorably observed, archaeologists carry large diachronic portmanteaus whose internal dividers still bear the labels of unreconstructed evolutionism. From the familiar dichotomous formulations of the nineteenth century – *societas/civitas*, mechanical/organic solidarity, collective/individual consciousness, kinship/territory, homogeneous/heterogeneous – archaeologists, as well as historians and sociologists, have crafted complex narratives of progressive change, in which various elements together form a coherent configuration. This functionally related complex of elements has been postulated to include agricultural intensification and surplus production; increasing population scale, density, and heterogeneity; development of private property/unequal access to land or other strategic resources; centralized, supracommunity political organization; vertical hierarchies of wealth, power, and status; functional specialization, commerce and intercommunication. It is a list with which Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Morgan, and Weber would have been comfortable, as indeed they originally proposed many of its basic elements. Although archaeologists have, over time, varied the ordering of the elements, positing various ones as prime movers or many together as mutually reinforcing elements of multivariate models (summarized by Drennan 1996), the basic postulate of functional relationships among these elements has been very durable.

Sahlins' study of social stratification in Polynesia (1958) appeared to demonstrate the functional interrelations of a number of these different elements in societies far removed from the European societies (including the ancient Greeks and Romans) that had been the basis of nineteenth-century social theories. In Polynesia, different degrees of stratification (complexity) could be defined by the extent of co-occurrence within different societies of many of the functional elements listed above (Table 1.1). This supported the notion that the narrative tying all these elements together was of general applicability. Once incorporated within Service's (1962) formulation of chiefdom as a general stage of cultural evolution, Sahlins' work became enormously influential for archaeologists. Sahlins' (1963, 1968) elevation of Melanesian and Polynesian patterns to the status of generalized, ideal Big Man and Chiefdom types was instrumental in inaugurating what I refer to as the Oceanic hegemony in complex society archaeology.

Unpacking the evolutionary portmanteau

As research continued to accumulate in different areas of the world, however, dissonant notes were occasionally sounded. The identified elements of the narrative did not seem to correlate in some areas, and the slow work of unpacking the evolutionary portmanteau and of decou-

Table 1.1 *Social stratification in Polynesia*

Stratification criteria	Group I Hawaii, Tonga, Samoa, Tahiti	Group IIa Mangaia, Uvea, Mangareva	Group IIb Marquesas, Tikopia	Group III Pukapuka, Toketau
Status levels	3	2	2	2
Pre-eminent stewardship of land by chiefs	Yes	Yes	No (but rights of access to stategic resources usually held by elites)	No
Control of communal and craft production by persons of high rank	Yes	Yes	Usually	No
Direct supervision of household production	Yes	No	No	No
Legitimate use of force for infringement of chiefly decrees	Yes	Limited/No	No	No
Segregation of upper ranks from subsistence production	Yes	Highest chiefs only	No (except Marquesas)	No
Status markers (clothes, ornaments) elaborated	Yes	Yes, but less than in Group I	Few	None
High status endogamy	Yes	Not strictly enforced	Slight preference only	No
Sumptuary rules and obeissance behaviors	Yes	Not marked	Few to none	Few to none
Spectacular and unique life crisis rituals for high chiefs	Yes	Some	Differences of degree, not kind	Almost none

Source: Summarized from Sahlins 1958.

pling elements formerly believed to be functionally related began in earnest. McGuire (1983), on the basis of Near Eastern archaeological material, concluded that substantial vertical inequality preceded significant horizontal heterogeneity there, forcing a decoupling of inequality and heterogeneity, a finding that has been expanded by general discussions that recognize the existence of some inequality (by gender, age, ability, and temperament) in even the most egalitarian human social systems (Feinman 1995: 256; Flanagan 1989). With the documentation of institutionalized inequality among some hunter-gatherer populations, its emergence has been decoupled from agricultural production and intensification (Feinman 1995: 256). Gary Feinman and Jill Neitzel (1984) found no universal links between political ranking and agriculture, population, trade or surplus production in a comparison of New World middle-range societies. Hastorf (1990) in a study of the pre-Inca Sausa of Peru, separated the onset of political inequality and ranking from economic production, and by extension, decoupled political inequality from wealth inequality. Recently, Nelson (1995) suggested that scale and hierarchy must be considered as elements that do not necessarily covary, a theme that I also consider in my other contribution to this volume.

Looking at African case materials relevant to our baggage-sorting, we find that some of these critiques were anticipated in the African literature. In *Social Stratification in Africa*, a title whose similarity to that of

Sahlins' 1958 monograph is quite intentional, Tuden and Plotnicov (1970: 6) pointed out that "some of the prevalent assumptions regarding the nature and underlying factors of social stratification have failed to utilize comparative data sufficiently." Unfortunately, this message went largely unnoticed by archaeologists. Tuden and Plotnicov decoupled economic inequality from ranked social differentiation (social stratification):

> One of the most critical comparative problems in the study of stratification concerns the primacy and inter-relationship of the factors that produce and maintain hierarchical groupings. The view is commonly shared that a society becomes stratified when some groups are excluded from access to strategic economic resources . . . (Fried 1967). Economic power is postulated as having priority over political power in this process . . . African societies provide no clear correlation between economic power, control of the political system, and stratification. In a number of cases – Amhara, Galla, Marghi – the superior strata neither control economic power systematically nor consistently receive honor. Of all the societies included here, only two – Rwanda and South Africa – manifest clear economic, political and evaluative differences between strata. (Tuden and Plotnicov 1970: 8)

Lloyd Fallers (1973: 75) drew a similar conclusion: "Traditional African societies have characteristically exhibited a pattern of role differentiation in which political specialization has been more prominent than economic specialization . . . . While sharply 'peaked' systems of stratification have been created in the great traditional kingdoms, even in these cases, there has been relatively little cultural differentiation between elite and common folk and little concentration of the non-human means of production in elite hands." There is, on the other hand, a highly developed appreciation of and competition for status and prestige in African societies, with even tiny polities often richly accoutered with titles, offices, and insignia, as, for example, the Sukur polity described by David and Sterner in this volume. Bargatsky (1987: 27) has suggested that economic status has emerged from the enormous complexity of status systems in pre-industrial societies to become the one status criterion valued above all others in capitalist societies. This can blind us to the importance of status distinctions that lack a material, economic foundation, or even to the possibility that significant status differences can be thus constructed.

Goody (1971, 1976: 111–13) also noted the low incidence of economic stratification in African societies based on agriculture and argued that it was linked to abundant land, such that economic stratification based on access to and control over scarce land (the European model, also relevant to Polynesia [Goldman 1970]) rarely developed. Thus, theoretical formulations which stress the fundamental importance of rent extraction to the emergence of social complexity (e.g., Earle 1991b; Gilman 1991) may be inappropriate for Africa.

Instead, chiefship tends to be over people rather than land, and goods are dispersed more readily than accumulated, through bridewealth payments for as many wives as one can afford. Of great strategic significance in terms of building up a following is the power held by chiefs throughout Africa to allocate land to new settlers, a costless resource overlooked by narrowly materialist explanations for the emergence of chiefdoms (Kopytoff, this volume). The widespread emphasis on maximizing fertility through polygyny made generational conflict over access to women a more important historical dynamic than class conflict. For Goody (1976), the practice of royal–commoner marriage (open connubium) even in some of the most highly centralized African societies (e.g., Buganda) produced a centrifugal effect on wealth that was quite the opposite of the wealth sequestering effects of hypergamy and dowry in Europe. Iliffe (1995: 96) points out that the African board game known in West Africa as *mankala* makes an interesting contrast with chess, which is a game of a stratified society with unequal pieces and the objective of destroying the opposing forces. In *mankala*, all the pieces are of equal value and the aim is to capture the opposing pieces and add them to one's own. It is the game of an essentially classless society dedicated to building up its numbers. This puts the tremendous demographic advantage arising from cattle possession (Bantu East and southern Africa, the Nilotic and Great Lakes regions, and the West African Sahel) in perspective: no other scarce, storable, and reproducible form of wealth existed by which to gain political clients or to acquire wives without exchanging kinswomen (Iliffe 1995: 106; Kuper 1982).

This does not mean that there was no inequality in African societies, nor that control over material resources other than cattle did not play an important role in articulating power. As mentioned above, the pervasive emphasis on fertility and polygyny created significant inequalities in access to wives, inequalities that were mediated through control by elders and chiefs of the goods required for bridewealth (Douglas 1967; Meillassoux 1960). Jan Vansina (1990) has shown for Central Africa how political inequality is an extension of the elders/juniors model of inequality within domestic units ("houses"). However, widespread ideals of chiefly

generosity, relative material equality among (not within) "houses" and lineages, plus the constant cycle of amassing then redistributing goods to expand one's prestige by enlarging the household unit (adding wives or slaves) or by purchasing titles and society memberships, meant that many (but by no means all) African hierarchical societies did not manifest the elements of economic stratification that archaeologists most often seek (e.g., Peebles and Kus 1977; Wason 1994). As Burton observed while on a mission to the king of Dahomey: "Truly it is said, while the poor man in the North is the son of a pauper, the poor man in the Tropics is the son of a prince" (cited in Goody 1976: 99).

Gwyn Prins (1980) provides insights into the value system underlying this common phenomenon in Africa as he describes the food redistribution system (*silyela*) common in the great Bulozi kingdom of the Zambezi floodplain in the 1900s. Within each village at dinner time, all villagers would gather at the headman's compound, bringing their cooked food, which would then be divided into the bowls of various groups, including slaves, at the headman's direction. Parallel to this was a similar system for allocating high status food (cattle, large game animals). Through *silyela*, the social hierarchy of headman, freemen, women, children, and slaves was restated daily, but within a framework that ensured adequate food to all groups. In this way, the effects of shortage could be generally shared and mitigated. As Prins observes:

> It [*silyela*] indicates a set of extra-economic priorities at work influencing the material base of the community. These priorities constituted the moral economy, in contrast to the material economy, which it embraced and directed . . . here again, it has to be stressed in order to stifle at birth a common reaction to such a statement – that of course this usage should not be taken to imply that Lozi villagers were insensible to the motivations of the market economy. Simply, the creation and manipulation of a surplus in the sense in which we generally take it was a lower priority than the dominant concern, which was to ensure the survival of the moral community with minimum risk of famine . . . Furthermore, *silyela* shows how uneven accumulation of surplus was not feasible. What was surplus to the "reproduction of necessary labour" was committed to the "reproduction of the community." (Prins 1980: 91)

The same "culture-specific rationality" governed the disposal of the produce of state gardens, which were scattered throughout the land, "owned" by the king and cultivated by labor tribute. But they were not "private estates." Their products were dispersed in three ways: they were placed in storehouses of the guardian to be released in time of need. The remainder was collected by emissary chiefs and taken to the capital as tribute, the bulk of which was taken to public storehouses to feed the public, while a smaller amount went to the royal storehouse to feed the court. The village-level *silyela* distribution was in all its essentials echoed at the top of the hierarchy (Prins 1980: 93). It is, of course, possible to contrast the Lozi kingdom with another equally extensive paramountcy, Ashanti, where wealth accumulation was assiduously pursued (McCaskie 1995; Wilks 1993), but all this is merely to demonstrate that wealth accumulation and manipulation of surplus by elites primarily to further personal political agendas is a highly variable aspect of political hierarchies. As Miller (1988: 47) observed with reference to West Central Africa: "What ambitious men struggled to achieve was . . . not direct supervision over others, and still less stocks of the physical products of their labour beyond immediate needs, since both people and their fabrications were all too perishable, but rather a general claim to unspecified future labor and its product at whatever moment need for them might arise."

Functionalist assumptions about the relationship of agricultural intensification, population density, and land tenure to political centralization and hierarchies of wealth, power, and status have also been seriously challenged in much of Africa (Netting 1990; Shipton 1984, 1994). Service (1971: 152) found Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's (1940) conclusion that there is no significant general relationship between high population density and political centralization in Africa "dangerously misleading" and "astonishing." We have already mentioned Stevenson's (1968) valiant but flawed attempt to restore order, prompting Marvin Harris (1968: 530), Stevenson's thesis chairman at Columbia, to extol his "brilliant defense" against the distortions of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, which "threatened to reduce our understanding of state formation to a shambles." For Stevenson, the Igbo (Ibo) of southeastern Nigeria, acephalous populations with pre-colonial densities of 150–400 persons/km^2, posed a particularly intractable problem. He went to considerable lengths to contrive an "emergent Ibo state" out of a widespread Igbo oracle cult (the Arochukwu) that organized regional trade. While certain centralized pan-Igbo features emerged in the context of the Arochukwu, these did not constitute an integrated political hierarchy (Northrup 1978; Ottenberg 1970). The Arochukwu oracle traders are in fact much more relevant to discussions of alternate pathways to complexity, and we will return to them below.

In fact, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's observation has proven to be remarkably robust (Netting 1990: 56–7; Shipton 1984, 1994; Taylor 1975: 34; Vengroff 1976). Hierarchical, statelike forms of political organization turn out, in much of agrarian eastern and southern Africa, to be just as likely to occur in the context of extensive agricultural systems and easy rural mobility, with population densities under four persons/km^2 in the case of the complex Lozi polity (Gluckman 1951). Leaders competed with each other to attract as subjects shifting cultivators who moved frequently and did not ordinarily establish heritable property rights. Descent-based lineage systems (e.g., the Tiv of Nigeria, the Nuer of Sudan) may occupy regions of high population pressure in which the segmentary lineage organization is well suited to expansion into the neighboring lands of non-kin (Sahlins 1961; Stone 1996: 188–94). Here, land was inherited from agnates and there were elaborate systems of land clientage for those who could not obtain adequate holdings.

As Netting (1990: 46, 56) has pointed out, this inverts common evolutionist assumptions (with a pedigree extending back to the publication of Morgan's *Ancient Society* in 1877) that link heritable property rights with political hierarchies and kin-based societies with free, communal access to resources. Heritable property rights emerge as resources become scarce through population increase and intensification, but occur at every political level from the autonomous village through states and empires (Netting 1990: 49). That these property rights do not generally or permanently become an instrument of class oppression appears to reflect an African ideal of "fairness in flexibility," according to which "access to land should go to those who need it and can use it, and no one should starve for want of it" (Shipton 1994: 350). Netting (1990: 59, 61) concludes that "political centralization, valuable as it may be for organizing territorial defense and promoting regional exchange, does not appear to be directly implicated in the efficient functioning of intensive agriculture under rural demographic pressure." In some cases, such as the Gamo of the south-central Ethiopia highlands, the logic of permanent intensive agriculture at high population densities (200–1000/km^2) appears to have militated against the emergence of the state. Here, although the basic political unit was a neighborhood (*guta*), vast federations were created by conquest, with a balance of power between priests (who would be kings) and citizens' assemblies successfully preventing the consolidation of hierarchy (Abélès 1981; Netting 1990: 58).

These African studies can thus contribute to the important archaeological critiques (e.g., Feinman 1995; Feinman and Neitzel 1984; McGuire 1983; Paynter 1989; Roscoe 1993; Saitta and Keene 1990; Yoffee 1979) of what Yoffee (1993) calls the "holistic" model of evolutionary change, in which economic inequality and control, heterogeneity and social stratification, hierarchy, power, centralized authority, and prestige are assumed in various combinations or all together to be systematically linked in an evolutionary lock-step. The complex narrative that was constructed out of nineteenth-century dichotomies is no longer acceptable as a general account of the development of human society. With the universal relevance of various elements derived from these dichotomies in question, mechanistic models identifying them as subsystems of homeostatic cultural systems have consequently been rejected. In their place, human actors, not reified systems, take pride of place as agents of culture change (Brumfiel 1992; Eisenstadt et al. 1988a). Chiefdoms, previously situated in passive functionalist/adaptationist theoretical mode, are now recast, with the emphasis on political leaders as agents and strategizers (Earle 1991a, 1991b).

Despite this welcome shift in emphasis, the dichotomizing polarities of the nineteenth century still shape research approaches and priorities. Among the most deeply embedded concepts is the notion of change from simple to complex social forms as successive differentiation from incoherent homogeneity to coherent heterogeneity involving the emergence of specialization and hierarchy (Crumley 1995; Rowlands 1989b; Spencer 1971). For Herbert Spencer, writing in 1857, the degree of hierarchical differentiation was the essence of political complexity. His political typology of simple (autonomous village), compound (chiefdom), doubly compound (state) and trebly compound (empire) societies was adopted by Carneiro (1981: 45) in his influential discussion of chiefdoms. Spencer's (1971) ideas on progress and evolution were shaped by an organic analogy of ontogenic unfolding, in which the elements of each succeeding evolutionary stage are present in earlier phases. In archaeology, this metaphor can easily lead to teleology in the quest for centralized hierarchy and control in non-state societies presumed to be the ancestors of future states, as Shennan (1993: 53) points out.

The pervasive metaphor of complexity as hierarchy continues to shape research priorities by privileging the search for vertical differentiation in the archaeological record, a point that Ann Stahl, Rod McIntosh and Raymond Asombang also explore in their contributions to this volume. In recent years, the unilineal shape of this quest for emergent verticality has attracted comment and criticism, accompanied by calls for exploration of models of horizontal complexity, of systems of diffuse, decentral-

ized, consensus-based, or horizontally counterpoised power, and of the variety of pathways to complexity that can be detected in human history (e.g., Arnold 1996; Blanton et al. 1995; Crumley 1979, 1987, 1995; Drennan 1996; Ehrenreich et al. 1995; Feinman 1995; Morris 1997; Nelson 1994; Price and Feinman 1995; Stone 1997; Yoffee 1993). Africa has much to offer to this discussion, since critiques of narrowly construed hierarchical approaches to complexity in African political systems go back almost fifty years. These critiques open up issues of particular relevance to recent archaeological concerns with documenting variability in intermediate-level societies.

African perspectives

As we have seen, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's (1940) influential classification of political systems in Africa, true to its intellectual roots in the Durkheimian enterprise and Maine's studies of ancient law, seriously considered only two major types: those with centralized authority, administrative machinery and judicial institutions, and those without, for which the structure of order was provided by kinship. Their approach provoked a deluge of negative commentary. Both Brown (1951) and Kaberry (1957) pointed out that lineage organization was not the only structural principle ordering acephalous societies: in numerous cases, horizontal, cross-cutting associations – such as age sets, secret societies, cult groups, and title societies – were important in creating complex political structures. Such associations also played significant political roles in some societies where central authority was also present, such as West Africa's Mende and Yoruba and virtually all of the Lakes kingdoms in East Africa. The diversity of acephalous organization forms in Africa has been wrestled into a variety of alternate classifications (e.g., Cohen 1965; Eisenstadt 1959), the most elaborate of which recognized four types and three subtypes (Middleton and Tait 1958). Horton (1971), in an important article too often overlooked by non-Africanists, recognized, in addition to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's segmentary lineage systems, two other, more complex forms of organization found in acephalous societies: one is the dispersed, territorially defined community, consisting of a local confederation of lineages of mixed origin, (the result of disjunctive migrations into the area), integrated politico-ritually by cult organizations; the other is the large compact village, in which a substantial population aggregation (as high as 11,000 in the case of the Yakö of southeastern Nigeria [Forde 1964]) is horizontally integrated by a variety of associations, cults, and secret societies. Often, a conciliary body of title-holders or cult

priests holds moral, ritual and/or juridical authority. In both cases, considerable complexity has emerged in the absence of centralized authority. As Dillon (1990: 1) points out, although studies of elaborate non-centralized systems have a long tradition in Africa – including the Tallensi, Lowili, Anuak, some Igbo polities, and the Yakö – the literature reflects little agreement on how these systems are to be understood. Consequently, they tend to be overlooked in general accounts of cultural evolution (e.g., Johnson and Earle 1987), an example of the "winnowing of variability" to which Ann Stahl refers in her contribution to this volume. However, the study of complex, horizontally integrated societies is essential for understanding the extent to which – and under what circumstances – alternatives to the development of hierarchy are pursued.

Horizontal complexity: an Igbo example

The Igbo (formerly written as Ibo) provide a different configuration for non-centralized organization of populations numbering in the thousands. They are organized into over 200 separate, clustered village groups in southeastern Nigeria, each one with its own name, internal organization, and central market. Each group has its own characteristic rituals and other cultural features that distinguish it from its neighbors. There is, in fact, a great deal of variation among Igbo groups, reflecting differing patterns of contact and accommodation with other societies. The village groups range in size from several thousand to over 75,000 people. The Afikpo village group (Figure 1.1), with twenty-two villages and a population of 26,000, provides an example of the spatial organization of these entities (Ottenberg 1971). Each village group is organized on the basis of segmented patrilineal descent groupings and associations, particularly age sets and grades, secret societies, and title societies. Village governance is conducted by direct democracy (all adult males); at the level of the village group, which represents the largest unit of regular political action, a representative system is adopted. Although the present-day system of governance of sprawling village groups by consensus of elders is undoubtedly a product of the centralized power of the colonial and post-colonial state, it is not clear whether the Igbo were differently, perhaps more centrally, organized in the pre-colonial period (Ottenberg 1971: 312). What we can say is that the British who first entered the Igbo area reported finding no traditional rulers, in contrast to the situation they observed elsewhere, such as among the Igala to the north and the Yoruba to the west.

Researchers have long puzzled over why the Igbo, who were deeply involved in the oil palm and slave trade in the
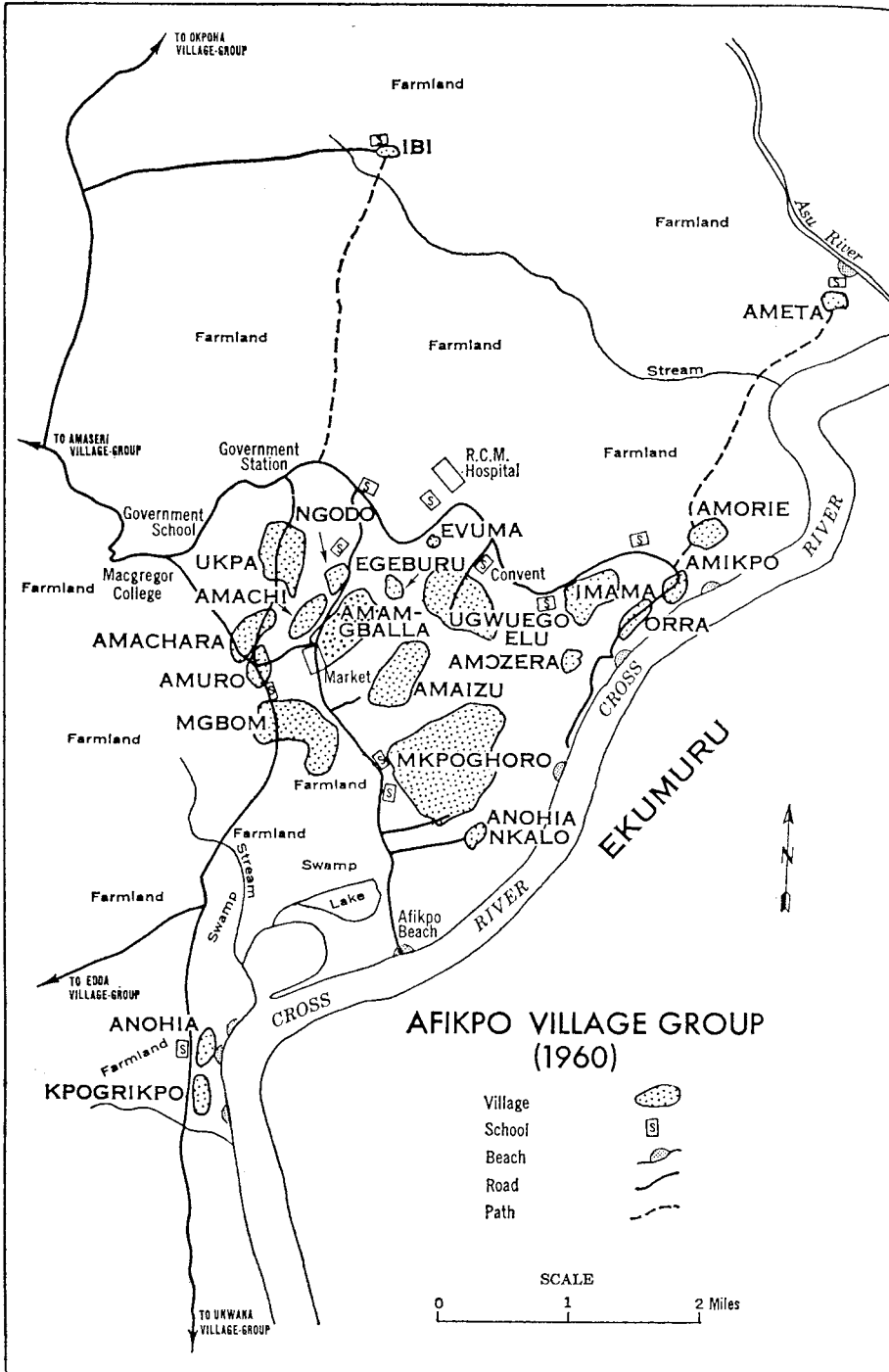
Figure 1.1   Afikpo village group (reproduced with permission from Leadership and Authority in an African Society *by Simon Ottenberg, © University of Washington Press 1971).*