The Rise and Decline of the State

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1 Before the state: prehistory to AD 1300

Definitions of the state have varied widely. The one adopted here makes no claim to being exclusive; it is merely the most convenient for our purpose. The state, then, is an *abstract* entity which can be neither seen, nor heard, nor touched. This entity is not identical with either the rulers or the ruled; neither President Clinton, nor citizen Smith, nor even an assembly of all the citizens acting in common can claim that they *are* the state. On the other hand, it includes them both and claims to stand over them both.

This is as much to say that the state, being separate from both its members and its rulers, is a corporation, just as universities, trade unions, and churches *inter alia* are. Much like any corporation, it too has directors, employees, and shareholders. Above all, it is a corporation in the sense that it possesses a legal *persona* of its own, which means that it has rights and duties and may engage in various activities *as if* it were a real, flesh-and-blood, living individual. The points where the state differs from other corporations are, first, the fact that it authorizes them all but is itself authorized (recognized) solely by others of its kind; secondly, that certain functions (known collectively as the attributes of sovereignty) are reserved for it alone; and, thirdly, that it exercises those functions over a certain territory inside which its jurisdiction is both exclusive and all-embracing.

Understood in this way, the state – like the corporation of which it is a subspecies – is a comparatively recent invention. During most of history, and especially prehistory, there existed government but not states; indeed the idea of the state as a corporation (as opposed to a mere group, assembly, or community of people coming together and living under a set of common laws) was itself unknown. Arising in different civilizations as far apart as Europe and the Middle East, Meso- and South America, Africa, and East Asia, these pre-state political communities were immensely varied – all the more so since they often developed out of each other, interacted with each other, conquered each other, and merged with each other to produce an endless variety of forms, most of them hybrid.

Nevertheless, speaking very roughly and skipping over many intermediate types, they may be classified into: (1) tribes without rulers; (2) tribes with rulers (chiefdoms);[1] (3) city-states; and (4) empires, strong and weak.

Tribes without rulers

Tribes without rulers, also called segmentary or acephalous societies, are represented by some of the simplest communities known to us. Before the colonization of their lands by the white man led to their destruction, they included so-called band societies in many parts of the world: such as the Australian aborigines, the Eskimo of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, and the Kalahari Bushmen. Other communities discussed here were somewhat larger and their political organizations slightly more sophisticated. Among them are some East African Nilotic tribes such as the Anuak, Dinka, Masai, and Nuer made famous by the anthropological researches of Evans-Pritchard;[2] the inhabitants of the New Guinea highlands and Micronesia; and most – though not all – pre-Columbian Amerindian tribes in both North and South America.

What all these had in common was the fact that, among them, "government" both began and ended within the extended family, lineage, or clan. Thus there were no superiors except for men, elders, and parents, and no inferiors except for women, youngsters, and offspring including in-laws (who, depending on whether the bride went to live with the groom's family or the other way around, could be either male or female). In this way all authority, all rights, and all obligations – in short all social relations that were institutionalized and went beyond simple friendship – were defined exclusively in terms of kin. So important were kin in providing the structure of the community that, in cases where no real ties existed, fictive ones were often invented and pressed into service instead. Either people adopted each other as sons, or else they created the sort of quasi-blood tie known as guest-friendship in which people treated each other as if they were brothers. Among the Nuer, this system was taken to the point that women could, for some purposes, "count" as men.[3]

[1] In distinguishing between tribes without rulers and chiefdoms, I follow M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, eds., *African Political Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940). For some other classifications of tribal societies, see E. R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization* (New York: Norton, 1975), and T. C. Llewellen, *Political Anthropology: An Introduction* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1983).

[2] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940). This is probably the most complete and sympathetic description of a tribe without rulers ever produced.

[3] Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 180–9.

Within the limits of the kin group the individual's position relative to everybody else was determined very precisely by his or her sex, age, and marital status. Conversely, those who for one reason or another were not surrounded by a network of kinspeople – such as foreigners originating in other tribes and, in many places, unwed mothers – tended to find themselves in a marginal position or with no position at all. An excellent case in point is provided by the biblical story of Ruth. Ruth, originally a Moabite, married an Israelite man who had settled in her native country. Left a widow by his death, she, together with her mother-in-law Naomi, moved from Moab to Israel. However, so long as she was not recognized and reintegrated into her late husband's family by marrying one of his relatives her situation in life remained extremely precarious. Not only was she reduced to beggary, but as a woman on her own she was exposed to any kind of abuse that people chose to inflict on her.

In the absence of any institutionalized authority except that which operated within the extended family, the societies in question were egalitarian and democratic. Every adult male was considered, and considered himself, the equal of all others; nobody had the *right* to issue orders to, exercise justice over, or demand payment from anybody else. "Public" tasks – that is, those tasks that were beyond the capacity of single family groups, such as worship, big-game hunting, high-seas fishing, clearing forest land, and, as we shall soon see, waging war – were carried out not by rulers and ruled but by leaders and their followers.[4] The operating units were so-called sodalities, or associations of men. In many societies, though not all, each sodality had its own totemic animal, emblem, and sacred paraphernalia, such as musical instruments, masks, festive clothes, and so on. The items in question, or at any rate the instructions for manufacturing them, were believed to have been handed down by the gods. They were kept under guard in specially designated places and were often considered dangerous for outsiders, particularly women and children, to touch or even look at.[5]

Membership in a sodality did not depend on a person's free choice but was passed along by heredity. Every few years a ceremony would be held; old men would be passed out, and their places taken by a group of youths, mostly related to one another through the network of kin, who joined the ranks of the sodality after passing through the appropriate rituals.[6] Within

[4] The early Germanic tribes expressed this relationship rather exactly by calling those who obeyed the leader his *Gefolgschaft* (literally "follow-ship"). See H. Mitteis, *The State in the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1974), p. 11.

[5] See Y. Murphy and R. P. Murphy, *Women of the Forest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 92–5, for an example of such arrangements.

[6] For the working of age-group systems, see B. Bernhardi, *Age–Class Systems: Social Institutions and Politics Based on Age* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

each sodality leadership tended to pass from father to son. However, being well sired was of little use if the person in question did not also possess the necessary combination of personal qualities. Among them were a certain minimum age, eloquence, courage, experience, and, perhaps most important of all, proven skill in performing the various activities that made up the sodality's *raison d'être*. In many societies they also included a reputation for being able to command magic powers such as the ability, for example, to cause the game to appear at the appointed time and thus lead to a good hunting season.

Returning to the community as a whole, law, in the sense of a man-made, formally enacted (and therefore alterable), and binding set of regulations that prescribe the behavior of people and of groups, did not exist. In its place we find custom; in other words, an indeterminate number of unwritten rules which were partly religious and partly magic by origin. The rules covered every aspect of life from sexual mores to the division of an inheritance; thus our present-day distinction between the public sphere (which is covered by law) and the private one (where, as in ordering one's household or making one's will, for example, people are supposedly free to do as they please) did not apply. For example, custom dictated that a youngster *had* to pass through the appropriate initiation rites – and suffer the appropriate agonies – in order to be admitted to adult status, join the sodality to which the remaining members of his family belonged, and be allowed to marry. A newly married couple *had* to take up residence with the groom's family or with that of the bride. And brideswealth *had* to be shared with various male members of one's family, all of whom had a claim on it.

In the absence of the state as an entity against which offenses could be directed, another distinction which did not apply was the one between criminal and civil law; and indeed it has been said that the societies in question recognized tort but not crime.[7] Tort could, however, be directed not only against other people but – in cases such as incest or sacrilege – against the group's ancestral spirits and the deities in general. These were invisible, by and large malignant beings that dwelt in the air and took the form of wind, lightning, and cloud; alternatively they were represented by certain stones, trees, brooks, and other objects. Whatever their shape or chosen place of residence, they were intent on having their rights respected. If given offense, they might avenge themselves by inflicting drought,

[7] For an excellent discussion of these problems, see H. I. Hogbin, *Law and Order in Polynesia: A Study of Primitive Legal Institutions* (London: Christopher's, 1934), particularly ch. 4; and L. K. Popisil, *Kapauku Papuans and Their Law* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958).

illness, or infertility not just on the perpetrator but on his relatives or, indeed, anybody else.

Once again a good illustration of the way things worked is provided by the Bible, this time in the book of Leviticus, which should be regarded as the codification of previous tribal usage. Much of the book is concerned with uncleanliness, especially but not exclusively of a sexual kind – menstruation, unintended ejaculation, and the like. Each rule is followed by the ways in which, if broken, it is to be atoned for, the understanding being that the Lord was particularly concerned with such problems and would not tolerate impurity in His people. Minor transgressions carried no particular penalty and could be obviated by the individual resorting to temporary seclusion, purification, prayer, and sacrifice. However, major ones such as incest were known as *tevel* (abomination). They carried the death sentence, usually by fire, or else the text simply says that the culprit should be "cut off" from the people (in other words, destroyed). Thus, and although there was no separate category of criminal law, there did exist certain kinds of behavior which were recognized as injurious not just to individuals but to God and, through His wrath, the community as a whole, and which, unless properly dealt with, would be followed by the gravest consequences.

As this example shows, tribal custom, far from being regarded as part of the nature of things and automatically obeyed, was occasionally violated.[8] In the simpler "band" societies it was the head of the household who arbitrated and decided in such cases, whereas among the more sophisticated East African pastoralists and North American Indians this was the role of the village council. The council consisted of elders, meaning not just old people but those who had undergone the appropriate rituals marking their status and, as a result, were considered close to the spirits and custodians of the group's collective wisdom. Even so, membership of the appropriate age group did not in itself qualify a person to speak in council; while every councilman had to be an elder, not every elder was a councilman or, if he was, could command attention. To become a "talking chief" one had to possess a reputation for piety and wisdom as well as a demonstrated record in maintaining the peace among the members of one's own family group. As the Berti of Sudan put it, he who is unable to strengthen his own cattle-pen should not seek to strengthen that of his neighbor.[9]

The initiative for summoning the council was taken by the parties

[8] See B. Malinovsky, *Crime and Punishment in Primitive Society* (London: Kegan Paul, 1926).

[9] L. Holy, *Neighbors and Kinsmen: A Study of the Berti People of Darfur* (London: Hurst, 1974), p. 121.

involved in a dispute or, more likely, by one of their relatives who had taken alarm and gone to summon help. Assembling at a designated place – often under the shade of a sacred tree – the council would hear out those directly involved as well as other witnesses drawn from among their kinspeople. In case of an invisible offense – i.e., where a misfortune was suspected to have its origin in witchcraft – a diviner would be called to discover the perpetrator; next, the accused or suspected would be made to undergo an ordeal, such as drinking poison or dipping an arm in boiling water, as a way to determine his or her guilt.[10] The way to settle interpersonal disputes up to and including murder was generally by means of retaliation – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – restitution, or compensation. The latter was itself based on the customary scale: so much for the death or injury of a man, so much for a woman, or for a youngster. All these, however, were due only in case the person offended against belonged to a different family or lineage; one did not pay for injuring one's own.

As they lacked anything like a centralized executive or police force, the sole sanction at the elders' disposal consisted of their ability to persuade the members of the group to follow their wishes and carry out the council's decision. What really mattered was one's personal standing and the number of relatives whom one might call to one's assistance; as in all other societies, the strong and influential could get away from situations in which the weak and the unconnected became entangled. A small, intimate, and tightly knit community might not find it too difficult to discipline, and if necessary punish, isolated individuals. However, taking similar measures against persons whose relatives were numerous and prepared to stand with them was not so easy, since it might readily result in the group dividing into hostile camps and even to feuding followed by disintegration. Once again there are examples of this in the Bible: for example, the book of Judges where an attempt to punish members of the tribe of Benjamin for an outrage committed on a woman led to full-scale civil war.

The absence of a centralized authority also determined the form and nature of another function normally associated with the state, namely warfare.[11] In some of the more isolated and less sophisticated societies it scarcely existed; instead there were ritualized clashes between individuals using blunt weapons or none at all. Such was the case among the Australian aborigines, where the rivals confronted each other staff in hand. It

[10] The classic treatment of divination and ritual is E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

[11] The best work about the subject remains H. Turney-High, *Primitive War: Its Theory and Concepts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1937).

also applied to the Eskimo, where the two parties would exchange derisive songs in front of the assembled community until one or the other gave way, at which point his rival was declared the victor. But most societies, notably those of East and Central Africa as well as New Guinea, Micronesia, and the Americas, did not content themselves with such friendly encounters among their own people. Using sodalities as their organizational base, they mounted raids – which were themselves scarcely distinguishable from feuds – against the members of other lineages, clans, or tribes.

The most important objectives of warfare were to exact vengeance for physical injury, damage to property (e.g., livestock or gardens), offenses to honor, and theft (including the abduction or seduction of women). Another was to obtain booty, and again this included not merely goods but marriageable women and young children who could be incorporated into one's own lineage and thus add to its strength. From Papua through Africa to North and South America, very great importance was attached to the symbolic trophies that war was capable of providing. These took the form of enemy ears, scalps, heads, and the like; having been dried, smoked, pickled, or shrunk, they could either be carried about on one's person or else used to decorate one's dwelling. As in more developed societies, a person who possessed such symbols could readily translate them into social status, sexual favors, family alliances, and goods. Hence the role that war played in men's lives was often very large: both the Latin *populus* and the Germanic folk could originally stand for either "people" or "army." Among the North American Plains Indians, men were known as "braves," while in the book of Exodus the term "members of the host" is synonymous with "adult men." In the absence of a centralized decision-making body, war itself might be defined less as a deliberate political act than as the characteristic activity of adult males, undertaken in the appropriate season unless they were otherwise engaged.[12]

On the other hand, it was precisely because every adult male was at the same time a warrior that military organization was limited to raiding parties. By no means should sodalities be understood as permanent, specialized, war-making armed forces or even popular militias. Instead they were merely associations of men which, lying dormant for much of the time, sprang into life when the occasion demanded and the leader succeeded in convincing his followers that a cause worth fighting for existed. Often raiding parties could maintain themselves for weeks on end and cover astonishing distances in order to make pursuit more difficult;

[12] For the way these things worked in one extremely warlike society, and the implications for humanity as a whole, see N. Chagnon, *Yanomano: The Fierce People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983 edn.).

they were also capable of disciplining their members, breaking their weapons (a grave insult), inflicting corporal punishment, and even putting them to death if necessary. However, once hostilities were over, sodalities invariably dissolved, leaving the leaders stripped of their authority. This was the case, for example, among the Cherokee with their so-called red chiefs; so also among the Pueblo, Jivaro, Dinka, and Masai.[13] None of these societies had a system of rent, tribute, or taxation that would have redistributed wealth and thus given rise to a class of individuals with the leisure needed in order to train for, and wage, war as their principal occupation.

In some of these societies, such as the Bushmen, institutionalized religion played hardly any role and every household chief was at the same time his own priest. However, the majority did recognize a religious head in the person of the shaman, prophet, or priest whose authority went beyond that of the individual lineage. Karl Marx to the contrary, the most fundamental difference separating humans from animals is not that the former engage in production for a living.[14] Rather, it is that they recognize the idea of incest, even if the rule against it is occasionally broken. In no known case anywhere around the world did the family-based, face-to-face groups in which people spent most of their lives habitually marry among themselves. Instead they sought their partners among the members of similar groups, normally those which were related to them, but not too closely.

In addition, and on pain of inflicting misfortune, the deities demanded to be worshipped. From Australia to Africa to the Americas, these twin social factors made it necessary to hold periodical gatherings, or festivals. Depending on its religious importance and the number of people whom it brought together, a festival could last for anything between three days and a fortnight. A truce was declared and peace, i.e., the absence of mutual raiding, prevailed; this enabled the members of the various clans to assemble in order to pray, sacrifice, eat their fill, socialize, and exchange women (either permanently, by arranging marriages, or else temporarily by relaxing social mores) and other gifts. Coming on top of its practical and religious functions, the festival also provided the people with an opportunity to reaffirm their own collective identity as a community; such is the case in other societies to the present day.

[13] For this kind of military organization, see P. Clastres, *Society Against the State* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 177–80; P. Brown, *Highland People of New Guinea* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978); and J. G. Jorgensen, *Western Indians: Comparative Environments, Languages, and Culture of 172 Western American Indian Tribes* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1980).

[14] K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1939 [1843]), p. 7.

The person who led the celebrations, though he might make use of female assistants to carry out his duty, was invariably male. His position is best described as a combination of sage, prophet, and high priest; by origin he had to belong to the lineage which, according to tradition, was considered closest to the tribe's principal divinity. Holding the position presupposed extensive knowledge of tribal lore, astronomy, magic rites, medicine, and so on, all of which could be acquired only by means of a prolonged apprenticeship. Priests were expected to train their own successors from among members of their family, either sons or nephews. Even so the succession was not automatic; instead it had to be confirmed by the elders of the priestly lineage who selected the candidate deemed most suitable by them. Among the East African Shilluk and Meru, for example, he carried the title of *reth* or *mugwe*, respectively.[15]

Once he had taken up his position, the priest was distinguished by certain symbolic tokens of office: such as body paint, headgear, dress, the staff that he carried, and the shape of his residence. He might also be subject to taboos such as being forbidden to have his hair cut, touch certain objects considered unclean, eat certain kinds of food, or marry certain categories of women. His influence rested on the idea that the fertility of land, cattle, and people depended on the accomplishment of rituals that he alone, owing to his descent and the learning that had been passed on to him by his predecessor, could perform; as a Bakwain (modern Mali) shaman once allegedly put it to the explorer David Livingstone, "through my wisdom the women become fat and shining."[16] In this way a close connection existed between the tribe's welfare and his own. Priests were responsible for the timely occurrence of climatic phenomena, such as rain, without which "cattle would have no pasture, the cows give no milk, our children become lean and die, our wives run away to other tribes who do make rain and have corn, and the whole tribe become dispersed and lost."[17] If they failed in their duty, they might be deposed and a substitute appointed in their stead.

Cases are known when capable priests manipulated their presumed magic powers to develop their influence into authority and make themselves into *de facto* tribal leaders. They acted as mediators, settled disputes, represented their people in front of foreigners, and instigated action in respect to other groups, including, in colonial times, the organization of rebellions against the imperial power. Although, by virtue of their sacred

[15] See L. Mair, *Primitive Government* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 63ff.; and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Divine Kingdom of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), pp. 13ff.

[16] Quoted in M. Gluckman, *The Allocation of Responsibility* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), p. xviiii.

[17] *Ibid.*

position, priests could not function as military commanders or participate in the fighting, they often conducted the opening and closing ceremonies that were considered necessary first in order to authorize bloodshed and then as a means of atoning for it. In return for their ministrations they could obtain presents in the form of food, since parts of the offerings made to the deities were set apart for them. Their reward might also include clothing, services such as help in erecting their dwellings, and, in some societies, women.

Still, priests, however important their position, did not make custom, but merely explained what it was and interpreted it to suit the case at hand. No more than anybody else did they possess the right to command obedience. They did not levy taxes, did not have an organized following that might enforce their wishes, and did not exercise command in war. Their weapons were persuasion and mediation, not coercion; insofar as the sole sanctions at their disposal were of a kind that we should call supernatural, their power fell far short of that of a chief or, indeed, any kind of ruler in the ordinary sense of that term. It is from Samuel's description of the arrangements which a king would institute once he had been duly anointed and installed that one can learn of the things that he himself, as a mere prophet, could not do:

> This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you. He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots.
>
> And he will appoint him captains over thousands and captains over fifties; and will set them to clear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots.
>
> And he will take your daughters to be confectionars, and to be cooks and to be bakers.
>
> And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants.
>
> And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give them to his servants.
>
> And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work.
>
> He will take the tenth of your sheep, and ye shall be his servants.
>
> And ye shall cry out on that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you on that day.[18]

Tribes with rulers (chiefdoms)

Given that their social structure was almost identical with the extended family, lineage or clan, tribes without rulers were necessarily small and

[18] 1 Samuel, 8, 11–19.

rarely numbered more than a few thousand people. Though the Hobbesian picture of these societies as living in a constant state of war of all against all is probably overdrawn, by all accounts they were decentralized and those of them that stood above the band level were wracked by frequent feuds. Military operations were conducted on a small scale and casualties were usually few in number. However, over time they could represent an important factor in male mortality.

The way of life of these societies, regardless of whether it was based on hunting–gathering, cattle herding, temporary gardening, or some combination of these, demanded a low density of population, wide open spaces, and a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle. Since well-developed communications did not exist, the inbuilt tendency to split and disintegrate was strengthened. Disintegration must often have prevented feuds from going to the murderous extremes observed in societies with a more developed system of government. To this extent it constituted not only an affliction but a blessing as well.

Whether in war or peace, these societies were incapable of taking coordinated action on a scale larger than that of the sodality; the rare exceptions, such as the short-lived Iroquois League created in the American Northeast, merely prove the rule. Small numbers, common ownership over the means of production such as land, forest, and water, and relative economic equality also precluded specialization and a division of labor other than that which, in all societies, is based on age and sex. Since every household was almost entirely self-reliant in looking after its economic needs, standards of living and technological development remained at the subsistence level. Whatever the pristine virtues that Westerners from Rousseau and Diderot on have attributed to them, historically speaking they have been and still are – those that survive – among the least successful of all human societies. It was only in regions where they encountered no more advanced forms of government, such as Australia, parts of East Africa, and the North American Plains that tribes without rulers could spread over large territories and maintain their way of life. Everywhere else their fate was to be pushed into the jungles, as in South America and Central Africa; deserts, as in South Africa; or the arctic wastes of Greenland, Canada, and Alaska. And indeed it is only in such undesirable environments that some of them managed to hold out until recently.[19]

By contrast, tribes with rulers, also known as chiefdoms, may be found

[19] The idea that the simpler tribes without rulers are really the remnants of more complex societies that disintegrated is advanced by E. E. Service, *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective* (New York: Random House, 1964). See also D. W. Lathrap, *The Upper Amazon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), and R. D. Alexander, *Darwinism and Human Affairs* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979).

in many parts of the world. They include many societies in Southeast, West, and South Africa, as well as others all over Southeast Asia, Polynesia, Hawaii, and New Zealand. By way of further examples, history tells us of the tribes that destroyed the Mycenean civilization and ruled Greece during the Dark Ages between about 1000 and 750 BC; the various Gothic, Frankish, and other Germanic tribes, as they were from the later centuries of the Roman empire (i.e., *not* those of Tacitus' day, who probably corresponded more closely to tribes without rulers) to the rise of the Carolingian empire in the eighth century AD; and the Scandinavian tribes during the tenth century AD, in other words just before they became Christianized and turned toward more centralized forms of government.

Chiefdoms were what their name implies: they had chiefs, i.e., individuals who were elevated over other people and possessed the *right* to command them. That right was invariably based on the chief's alleged divine descent, which in turn dictated that the normal method of succession should be from father to son. Still, a system whereby the eldest male descendant simply stepped into his predecessor's shoes seldom applied. The reason was that, as in present-day Saudi Arabia (which until the 1930s was merely a loose assembly of chiefdoms, all engaged in constant warfare against each other), most of these societies were polygamous *par excellence*. No doubt one motive for polygamy may be found in the pleasures of the bed; from King Solomon with his thousand wives to Chairmen Mao with his nurses, satisfying their sexual appetites has always been one of the privileges of rulers, so that the higher the status the more numerous the wives.[20] However, females by means of their labor also presented a source of wealth – note the numerous "women adept at spinning" who are passed from hand to hand in the pages of the Homeric poems. Those who were descended from noble lineages, or were particularly beautiful, could also act as status symbols for their owners.

The natural result of polygyny was a large number of sons who, when the time came, might present themselves as candidates for the succession. The potential resulting conflict could be made worse because the women belonged to various different classes: some were the chief's legally wedded wives, others concubines, others perhaps domestics, captives, or slaves who had been put to breeding uses in addition to their other duties. While a few women might have their children as a result of a purely temporary liaison, the great majority probably conceived as a result of being part of the master's household in one capacity or another. Given

[20] R. D. White, "Rethinking Polygyny: Co-Wives, Codes and Cultural Systems," *Current Anthropology*, 29, 1989, pp. 519–72.

these gradations, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate offspring was by no means always clear.

In practice, it made a great difference whether the individual in question was personally capable of providing leadership and, above all, who his mother was. Normally the chief's first, or principal, wife was descended from an eminent family. Having been formally given away by her kin, she was ceremonially wedded and later saw her offspring enjoy precedence over the rest. As the old ruler died and was replaced by one of his sons, the heir's mother would be a person of some importance since he owed his position to her; it is in this limited sense that the societies in question can be said to have been matrilineal. Once again, an example is provided by the Bible, this time by the book of Kings. As each new ruler of either Israel or Judea ascended the throne, the name of his mother was put on record, normally – unless she exceeded her proper role and tried to exercise power herself – for the first and last time. In the Germanic kingdoms of early medieval Europe, as well as in some African and Southeast Asian chiefdoms, it was customary for the chief to select one of his sons to be designated as his successor during his lifetime. To see that his wishes were carried out, a sort of regency council consisting of palace officials would be established.[21]

Next to the chief, society was generally divided in two different layers or classes. First came a privileged group, small in relation to the total population and consisting of the members of the chief's extended family, lineage, or clan. They enjoyed special rights such as access to the chief, much higher compensation to be paid in case of injury or death, and immunity from certain kinds of punishment which were considered degrading. Often they were distinguished by being allowed to wear special insignia and clothing or, in regions where the climate was favorable and clothes unimportant, tattoos. Considered as individuals, their position in society tended to be determined very exactly by their relationship with the chief, i.e., whether they were his sons, uncles, brothers, nephews, in-laws, and so on. Normally it was from among these people that the chief selected the provincial rulers. On the other hand, and precisely because they had some claim to the succession, they were rarely appointed to senior court positions such as *majordomo* or commander of the bodyguard.

Below the royal lineage, clan, or tribe was a much more numerous class of commoners: such as the ancient Greek laborers or *thetes* (also known

[21] For the way these things were done among the South African Bantu, e.g., see I. Schapera, *Government and Politics in Tribal Societies* (London: Watts, 1956), pp. 50ff. The Merovingians, too, had a similar system: I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751* (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 55ff.

under a variety of other derogatory names, such as *kakoi*, "bad ones"), the Natchez "Stinkers," and many others. They were subject to various kinds of discrimination, such as not being allowed to own cattle (the Hutu in Burundi and Rwanda), ride stallions (the bonders in pre-Christian Scandinavia), wear feather headgear (the Americas), or bear arms (many places around the world). If they were injured or killed by a member of the upper class, they or their families were likely to obtain little compensation or none at all; in the opposite case, their punishment would be particularly savage. The members of this class were not blood relations of the chief. On the contrary, for him and his close relatives to intermarry with them would, except under highly abnormal circumstances, be considered beneath their dignity, contaminating, and even dangerous. Particularly in Africa with its long history of tribal migration, settlement, and conquest, rulers and ruled often belonged to different ethnic groups. They did not necessarily share the same customs or even speak the same language.

The gap that separated them from the elite notwithstanding, the commoners were considered – and, so long as the community remained intact, considered themselves – subjects of the chief. They owed him their allegiance and, indeed, "belonged" to him in the sense that, directly or indirectly by way of the sub-chiefs of whom I shall speak in a moment, they were "his" people. In this way chiefdoms introduced a new and revolutionary principle of government. Blood ties continued to play an important role in determining who possessed what rights in respect to whom. This was true at the upper level, i.e., among the members of the chief's own clan, but it was also true at lower levels where, modified only by more or less strict supervision from above, the extended family group remained the basic entity in which most people spent their lives. The fact that chiefdoms were not based exclusively on such ties enabled the stronger among them to establish impersonal rule and achieve considerable numerical growth. With growth came at least some division of labor among various groups of the population: such as agriculturists, cattle-herders, fishermen, and even a few nonproducing specialists such as traders, artisans, and priests. More importantly for our purpose, much larger concentrations of political, economic, and military power could be created.

The chief's authority varied greatly. He might be little more than a head priest as described in the previous section: performing religious ceremonies, demanding presents, using those presents to maintain a few assistants, and lording it over his people by exercising his magic powers to reward or to punish. A critical turning point came when the members of the upper class, or some of them, became sufficiently elevated to cease

working with their hands. This stage had not yet been reached in the Greek world around 1200 BC: legend has it that when King Agamemnon's messenger, sent to announce summons for the Trojan War, arrived he found Odysseus plowing his field. It *had* been reached among the Germanic tribes of Tacitus' time and also in Scandinavia before AD 1000.

Among the most powerful chiefdoms known to us were the nineteenth-century ones of Angkole, Bunyoro, and Buganda (East Africa), Dahomey (West Africa), and Zulu (South Africa), whose chiefs had developed into veritable monarchs. They owed part of their power to supernatural factors. They were considered sacred and tended to live in seclusion; the longer established the chiefdom, the more true this became. Often there were taboos which prohibited them from eating certain foods, taking certain postures such as kneeling, touching certain substances, or even walking on the ground. Similar taboos surrounded the regalia, such as umbilical cords, staffs, headgear, stools, and drums. All of these supposedly possessed magic powers, which were beneficent if properly used – for example, in bringing rain or curing disease – but otherwise dangerous to touch or even look at. Often they had to be guarded by a special college of priests and were taken care of by being offered sacrifices and the like.

The most powerful chiefs possessed life-and-death power over their subjects. The latter were bidden to approach them flat on their stomachs, if indeed they were allowed to do so at all; as a chief traveled or was carried from one place to another in his litter, speaking to him without permission or looking him in the face might constitute a capital offense. Insofar as chiefs were expected to follow religiously dictated custom, they cannot be said to have stood above the law, let alone to have created it in the manner of absolute monarchs. On the other hand it is true that their orders, decrees, and prohibitions represented the sole source of positive legislation inside the community. They also acted as head justice and chief executive, rolled into one.

Whenever the territory he commanded was at all extensive, the chief stood at the apex of a pyramid consisting of regional sub-chiefs. Except when he deposed them, which might happen if they had given offense or appeared to present a threat, the position of sub-chief was passed from father to son; at this point the resemblance to feudalism becomes evident. Far from being specialized, they were small-scale copies of the chief. They maintained their own courts, lorded it over their own peoples, and, subject to some supervision from above, performed duties similar to his. From time to time they would also be called to their superior's court to pay him homage and sit on his council.

A genealogical investigation of the sub-chiefs would probably show

that most of them were related to the chief; where this was not the case, it was usually an indication that conquest and subjugation were of recent origin. Typically, indeed, chiefs engaged in a deliberate policy of reinforcing the structure of government by creating family ties. They sent out junior relatives to rule outlying provinces and presented their subordinates with women from the royal household to marry, thus building a ruling stratum whose members were linked to each other both by blood and interest. Representing another step in the same direction, the sub-chiefs' male offspring were often taken away when they reached an age of between six and nine and educated at court. In time, it was hoped, this practice would turn them into loyal supporters of the chief, useful either as provincial rulers or else as palace officials. Conversely, and, as was also the case in other societies such as early imperial Rome or feudal Japan, they served as hostages for their fathers' good behavior.

These types of personnel apart, both chief and sub-chiefs had retainers at their disposal. Though they were not close relatives, retainers were considered members of the household (the Anglo-Saxon term *huyscarls*, "house-braves," clearly indicates this status) and served the chief in various capacities. To make them easier to control they were often of foreign birth – in other words, either those who had been captured as children or else who were refugees from other tribes. In some cases they literally ate at his table, as did Scandinavian warriors before the introduction of more hierarchical forms of government under St. Olaf shortly after AD 1000 caused "kings" (best translated as "men of notable kin") to withdraw first to an elevated dais and them to their own quarters in quest of greater privacy.[22] Alternatively, as in many African, Asian, and Polynesian societies, they might be assigned some of the royal cattle to herd and/or a plot of land for the members of their families to cultivate.

As the Scandinavian chronicles and sagas in particular make clear, keeping the loyalty of subordinates – whether kinsmen, sub-chiefs, or retainers – depended in large part on the chief's ability to distribute wealth; this might take the form of food, clothing, cattle, land, and, in some societies, treasure as well as marriageable women. Some of this wealth originated as the spoils of war, while another part of it was owned directly by the chief. However, most of it derived from the idea that it was he who, by performing the proper rituals and making the proper sacrifices, was responsible for maintaining the land's fertility and ensuring that the harvest was good; it was also up to him to assign vacant land to people who had none. Hence anyone who cultivated land, grazed cattle

[22] For a step-by-step account of the withdrawal of Scandinavian kings into privacy, see Snorre Strualson, *Heimskringla, or the Lives of the Norse Kings*, E. Monsen, ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), pp. 520–1.

on it, hunted on it, or exploited its resources in any other way owed part of the produce of his labor to the chief.

Thus chiefdoms became the first political entities to institute rent, tribute, or taxation (it is typical of most pre-state societies, classical city-states alone excepted, that the three could not be clearly told apart) – in other words compulsory, unilateral payments that would take goods out of the hands of the many ruled and concentrate them in those of the ruling few.[23] The precise nature of the wealth paid depended on the resources that the environment afforded and also on custom. Everywhere it consisted of a share of the staple crop, be it grain, rice, taro, or manioc. Then there would be prestige objects such as fine domestic animals and fish; choice parts of big game, such as the head, skin, or tail, which were often used to decorate a chief's person and mark his rank; cloth in its various forms; and, in some societies, women.[24] Some chiefdoms, ancient as well as modern, made use of a primitive form of currency consisting of items which were not meant for immediate consumption but were easy to store and preserve. Among them were whales' teeth (the Pacific), tigers' claws (Africa), wampum beads (North America), and cowry shells (many different regions). All of these could be used to make payments to the chief, whose stores were normally the largest, as well as for other commercial purposes. Finally, chiefdoms that came into contact with more complex, urban civilizations were often familiar with metal money. It might be obtained by trade, as were the *manila* bracelets which the Portuguese introduced to West Africa and which as late as the 1940s were being used to carry out minor transactions. However, there were also cases when they created their own currency, as did eleventh-century Scandinavian chiefs in imitation of Byzantium.[25]

Some of the tribute was paid into the chief's storehouses directly by his own tenants. The rest of the population made payments to the sub-chiefs who, having collected them, took their cut – generally as much as they thought they could get away with, so long as it did not bring the chief's wrath down on them – and passed the rest on. Both chiefs and sub-chiefs possessed additional sources of revenue originating in their right to exercise justice, such as fees, fines, the belongings of condemned persons, and often bribes as well. Very often there existed a sort of licensing system under which chiefs of all ranks might demand and receive payment for granting their subjects certain privileges. These included the right to hold

[23] See A. I. Pershits, "Tribute Relations," in S. L. Seaton and H. J. M. Claessen, eds., *Political Anthropology: The State of the Art* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), pp. 149–56.

[24] For a good description of a tribute system while it was still in operations, see W. Mariner, *Natives of the Tonga Islands* (New York: AMS Press, 1979 [1818]), vol. II, pp. 230ff.

[25] See P. Einzig, *Primitive Money in Its Ethnological, Historical and Economic Aspects* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1949).

markets, engage in long-distance trade, go on raiding expeditions against other tribes (in which case the chief would most likely demand part of the booty), and so on. In short, scarcely any economic activity took place in which the chief was not involved and of which he did not take his share.

Part of the wealth that was gathered by such methods was consumed by the chief and the members of his household; from beautiful women to expensive riding animals, being able to engage in wasteful expenditure has always been one of the signs of government as well as one of its privileges. The rest would be saved and kept in storage in special structures that either formed part of the chief's own residence or else were scattered at strategic points throughout his domain. On certain festive occasions, as well as during an emergency such as famine or flooding or drought, the doors of the storehouses would be thrown open and the contents displayed – sometimes by way of potlatching – and used to feed the people. Such largesse could help reinforce the ties binding ruler and subjects. Alternatively one might regard it as a precaution because, under extreme circumstances, what was not readily distributed might be taken by force. There thus existed a sense in which the transfer of wealth was not unilateral but reciprocal. From Polynesia to Africa, its use for this purpose was one of the principal ways in which the entire system could be justified.

Above all, wealth could be used to engage and maintain followers; in this way it formed a basis for establishing, exercising, and increasing power of every kind. The entities that resulted tended to be much more centralized and more cohesive than tribes without rulers. They were also larger, starting in the hundreds but sometimes counting their populations in the tens and – though this was rare – hundreds of thousands; indeed it has been suggested that the pressure of population on resources was itself the most important factor that led to the establishment of chiefdoms and, with them, government proper.[26] Under such circumstances it might become necessary to divide the country into provinces and to build or clear at least some roads that would connect those provinces to the center. The latter assumed the form of a village larger than the rest. It contained, besides the chief's own residence, living quarters for his relatives and retainers as well as a temple for the deity from which he was descended.

Some chiefdoms, notably the prehistoric ones which probably erected the megaliths that dot the British countryside,[27] engaged in large-scale

[26] See above all E. Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change Under Population Pressure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965). See also M. Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

[27] See S. Shennan, "Wessex in the Third Millennium BC," paper given to Royal Anthropological Institute Symposium, 19 February 1983.

building enterprises, primarily for religious and military purposes. Messenger systems might be established and the chief's envoys provided with special insignia, such as palm leaves or staffs, that made their bearers inviolable and entitled them to receive food and other services from the local population. The core of the necessary labor force was probably provided by the chief's personal retainers. However, some of the more powerful African chiefdoms – such as the South African Zulu under their greatest "king," Shaka – also had available another and potentially much larger pool of manpower. This took the form of the members of certain age groups who, as a condition for being assigned land and allowed to marry, had to serve for a stipulated period – not that the chief was always scrupulous in releasing them after their obligation to him had been fulfilled.[28]

Whatever the source of the personnel, they could also be used for police work and war. Thus we find not only warriors but armed forces in the sense of a class of people who, by virtue of their status or age, were organized for engaging in violence, and at least some of whom were always at a chief's disposal. As far as we can follow them, e.g., in the case of the Zulu, the founders of chiefdoms were warlords who commanded their own forces. Trusting more to religion and less to force as a means of maintaining their power, their successors either appointed sub-chiefs to command or else selected other individuals from among their immediate collaborators. Sometimes there was a hierarchy of units, ranging from the royal guard through conscripted age groups all the way down to local forces. The latter, like the early medieval peasant-levy or *fyrd*, were made up of untrained or semi-trained personnel and mobilized only in an emergency.

Supported by force or the threat of force, chiefdoms were able to introduce hierarchy instead of equality; permanent authority instead of temporary leadership; tribute instead of more or less voluntary presents; and judgment, often reinforced by savage punishment, instead of the simple restitution and compensation that were the result of mediation by the village council. On top of engaging – or allowing their subordinates to engage – in the usual feuding, raiding, and booty-taking expeditions, they introduced conquest, subjugation, and domination of one group over another.[29] All these factors meant that boundaries between those who did and did not belong grew clearer, the more so because a settled way of life

[28] For Shaka and his cohorts, see most recently J. Taylor, *Shaka's Children: A History of the Zulu People* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), part I.

[29] The idea that government originated in conquest was particularly fashionable at the turn of the twentieth century. See L. Gumplowicz, *The Outlines of Sociology* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 1899), and F. Oppenheimer, *The State* (New York: Free Life, 1975 [1911]).

"caged" individuals and groups, by making it harder for them to move from the protection of one chief to that of another.

Stronger organization, larger numbers, and a greater capacity for coordinated action constituted the advantages which chiefdoms enjoyed over tribes without rulers. However, the fact that they were often able to expel or conquer the latter should not blind us to their limitations. The most important one was the tendency toward fission inherent in the system of government by hereditary sub-chiefs as well as the methods of succession. From biblical times through eleventh-century Scandinavia to nineteenth-century Africa, Asia, and Polynesia, the death of a chief often gave the signal for the start of a civil war. Rival candidates fought each other with every available means from assassination to full-scale battle; so did their mothers who, in case of defeat, might be put to death or, in some societies, suffer degradation by being assigned to the victor's harem. Sub-chiefs might use the opportunity to break away by ceasing to pay tribute, usurping their superior's rights, and establishing their independence. Neighboring chiefs might also intervene, seeking to increase their own power.

These factors explain why few chiefdoms, ancient or modern, lasted longer than a few generations. In those that did, most rulers came to power after winning a civil war and slaughtering the loser's relatives;[30] this "system," if resorted to often enough and taken far enough, was quite capable of causing development to be arrested and chiefdoms to be turned back into decentralized tribes without rulers.[31] To build stable, longer-lasting political organizations and avoid the repeated decimation of the social elite, new principles of government had to be introduced. It was necessary to regularize the succession to the chieftainship on the one hand, and prevent sub-chiefs from leaving their positions to their offspring on the other.

City-states

The societies described so far were overwhelmingly rural. Their members were nomadic or semi-nomadic, as many tribes without rulers were almost to the present day; alternatively they lived in villages that might be more or less permanent. Either way, their livelihood depended almost exclusively on hunting–gathering, cattle-raising, fishing, and agriculture

[30] The weaknesses of African nineteenth-century chiefdoms – the most sophisticated of all – are analyzed in M. Gluckman, *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), pp. 147ff.

[31] The case for believing that chiefdoms frequently "devolved" into tribes without rulers is made by M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), vol. I, pp. 69–73.