
Reconsideration of a Reformulation

Henri J. M. Claessen

Leiden University

A state is not a foundling without parents. A state does not appear unless a basis on which it can be built is present. There must be a sufficient number of people to form a complex stratified society; the society must control a specified territory; there must be a productive system yielding a surplus to maintain the specialists and the privileged categories; there must be found an ideology, which explains and justifies a hierarchical administrative organization and socio-political inequality (Claessen 2002). Where such conditions are not found to be present, the formation of a state becomes next to impossible. It is incorrect, however, to mention only one of these factors and suggest that this one (ideology) is considered by the author to be the only one necessary for the development of a state.

In Carneiro's view, population pressure, circumscription and war are the main mechanisms to create the state – or at least make the emergence of more complex socio-political societies possible. This, however, seems questionable. Take for example the Yanomamö, living in the Amazon forests. There was found here, according to their ethnographer, Chagnon (1968), some sort of a social circumscription. Warfare (if their fights might be called 'war' and not just 'fights') was endemic, and in shifting combinations the Yanomamö and neighboring groups fought each other – without ever succeeding in definitely overcoming the others. Yet, no complex socio-political organization ever developed here. The reasons therefore are simple: the number of people was too low; their territory was too small; the productive system was only sufficient for the group to survive, and there was not found an ideology in support of a more developed type of leadership. A similar situation was found in New Guinea, where, according to Carneiro the Mae Enga succeeded in defeating neighboring tribes and conquering some of their lands. Meggitt

Social Evolution & History, Vol. 11 No. 2, September 2012 36–43

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(1971), however, describes the Mae Enga as having a segmentary lineage system, which split up the society in numerous competing clans and sub-clans – a situation not very conducive to unification. Neither the Mae Enga, nor the Yanomamö, ever succeeded in creating a chiefdom – though Carneiro states that ‘success in war was the primary – indeed, the only – avenue that led from autonomous village to chiefdom’. The lack of sufficient supporting conditions (pointed out above) was clearly playing them false.

Though Carneiro stresses that population pressure, war, and circumscription are the main (in his view the only) roads to the development of more complex societies and the state, there are cases in which none of these mechanisms was found to play a role, while notwithstanding this, more complex social organizations emerged, and in the end even early states. This situation was found in Southeast Asia, where the Burmese Kachin are a case in point, and in a number of cases in Africa south of the Sahara.

The Kachin had an economy in which shifting cultivation was the principal means of livelihood. The families of the village were related to each other by a complex circulating marriage structure in which the brides went into one direction and the bride prices into the other. Under the prevailing ideology, the giver had a higher status than the receiver, but as each family was a giver as well as a receiver at the same time, the egalitarian structure remained intact (Leach 1954). The only possible source of disturbance of the balanced situation was the agricultural system. The small plots did not give a high yield, but every so often there were abundant crops to be harvested. Because the crop could not be stored, it was custom that the owner of the abundant crop gave a feast. He derived great prestige from his action. As from time to time each family was in the position to give such a feast, this caused a small structural change. When, however, one family was able to give several such feasts one after another, the egalitarian structure was affected and the fortunate family accrued a more permanent high prestige. If by some form of luck the prosperity of the family continued, the less fortunate villagers sought an explanation for these uncommon developments. They found these in religious terms: the fortunate fellow-villager had better access to the ancestors or the spirits than ordinary mortals. Up to that point, the position of the notable family had been based on distribution: the giving of feasts and

the handing out of gifts. But once the villagers understood how matters really stood, the stream of gifts changed direction. The villagers began to offer the well-to-do family small gifts with the request that they put in a good word for them with their ancestors. Naturally, such requests were acceded to and within the shortest possible time material goods flew in to the notable and he reciprocated this with immaterial matters – a veritable realization of Marx's Asiatic mode of production. The head of the notable family had become a kind of hereditary leader: a chief. After some time the initially voluntary gifts became obligatory, they changed from presents to taxation. When villagers refused to pay, pressure was exerted, and eventually armed retainers of the lord were sent to punish them and rob their possessions. The 'servant of the people' had definitely changed into the 'master of the people'. The development towards an early state had begun.

In a number of African societies the leadership of the society is based upon the notion of 'the first'. It is believed that the person who once, long ago, was the first to open the earth for agriculture met with the earth spirits, with whom he made a kind of treaty in which it was agreed that in exchange for certain specified rituals, he could procure fertility of women, land and cattle. This belief is widespread and is still found to play a great role as recent field-work reveals (summarized in Claessen 2010: 26; Cohen 1981 found this same belief in a number of Sahel communities). The one who 'opened' the earth and his successors are known as the earth priests. According to some traditions the earth priest lost in several regions his political prerogatives to the 'hunter', a (mythical) person assumed to have come from abroad (the forest) and connected with the distribution of meat. By marrying the earth priest's daughter(s) the hunter and his descendants became the dominant sacred leaders, while in other cases the ritual power over fertility was divided between the ruler and the priest (for details see the chapters on Africa in Claessen and Oosten 1996). Small groups of cultivators who want to settle in the fertile area and desire to make a claim on the fertility magic of the ritual leader, have to ask his permission, which is always given (great regions of Africa were but scarcely populated, Newman 1995), and in return have to display a certain degree of obedience. Treading this peaceful path, not inconsiderable territorial units gradually emerged. In this connection Kopy-

toff (1999: 88) remarks that chiefs do not so much 'rise above their neighbors as they were so to speak "levitated" upwards as more immigrants arrived and inserted more layers at the bottom of the hierarchy'. On this ideological basis – and not to forget the availability of the necessary number of people, the control of a territory, and a sufficient productive system – chiefdoms as well as early states developed and functioned in the whole of Africa south of the Sahara (Muller 1981).

Here seems the place to correct Carneiro's mistake with regard to the ancient state of Ghana. According to detailed maps and descriptions of ancient Ghana, that early state was not situated at the River Niger, and was not based upon trade in fish. The economic basis of Ghana was caravan trade, and its main export products were gold, salt and slaves (Levtzion 1973; Connah 1987).

How and why did more complex socio-political structures develop out of these peaceful and voluntary associations? The answer lies in the requirement that a certain degree of obedience was expected of the followers of the earth priest or sacred leader. Any socio-political leader – thus, also the earth priest – has to cope with the problem how to make his followers act according to the norms and values of the group. People do not obey rules and regulations just automatically. They often seek to escape obligations. Leaders thus had to develop measures to cope with deviant behavior. This made a certain coercion on the leader's side inevitable (Claessen 2005). Once the leader (the earth priest) decided to coerce disobedient members of his society, a further step in the direction of an early state organization was set. The evidence presented here seems sufficient to consider as falsified Carneiro's statement that 'the evidence for the role of warfare at every level of political development is overwhelming'.

The development of chiefdoms based on voluntary participation in a shared belief system was not limited to the areas mentioned above. Schaedel and Robinson (2004: 263) describe similar developments for the Andes region in South America. For the north coast of Mesoamerica, Freidel relates how about ten thousand years ago people here started agriculture (Freidel 1995: 3). After some 5000 years, villagers of the Tehuacán Valley started to look for volcanic glass and the trade routes developed. There are indications that shamans played a role at that early stage, and hu-

man sacrifices were brought to promote agricultural success. According to Grove and Gillespie (1992: 25), the most valuable lands were the river levees, which could produce extremely high yields. Control of the prime lands by one family or group of families provided the stimulus in acquiring economic, political, and social control over other groups. It seems probable that the dependence on agriculture led to the development of a belief in the necessity of interference of the gods. Some families, occupying the most fertile lands, appeared in the eyes of the less fortunate farmers to be more favored by the supernatural forces than others. This belief lay at the basis of the development of sacred chiefs. At the location of some chiefly villages a kind of altars were found, showing seated personages, sitting at the entrance to the underworld which displays their pivotal position in the cosmos as mediators between society and the supernatural forces associated with rain and fertility. These monuments make explicit a pan-Mesoamerican concept: 'the chief was elevated above society by his sacred quality' (Grove and Gillespie 1992: 27). It is against this background that Diehl and Coe (1995: 22) state that 'all of this indicates some kind of powerful, all-pervasive, and almost certainly centralized theological control over large parts of Mesoamerica during the Early and Middle Formative'.

Finally, there remains to consider critically Carneiro's repeatedly stressing the role of population pressure. Many of the developments described by him happened long ago in the past, when the earth was rather less populated than nowadays. Population pressure thus, will be difficult to demonstrate for that time. Carneiro also states that in an area of high quality, but limited size, population increase will produce tensions, which will be eventually released in a battle for the land. The defeated groups are faced with the choice of departing to more inhospitable places or subjecting themselves to the victors. Many of them will choose the second alternative. The organization the victors develop to keep them in subjugation is the state. To these views some comments can be made. First, the occurrence of fertile land surrounded solely by inhospitable regions is fairly rare. The choice is limited to islands, oases, or mountain valleys. Second, the state formation that eventually takes place does not solve the initial problems, because the population pressure is not removed, and may even increase – unless the victor exterminates the defeated groups, but this was not customary.

In Egypt, the Valley of the Nile was a circumscribed area, and in the course of time, the whole valley and delta were united under one ruler, the *pharaoh*. There are no indications that this unification was caused by problems of overpopulation. The river provided the land with water, and there was a yearly supply of rich alluvial sediments to restore soil fertility. With the help of waterworks the area of arable land was increased sufficiently to feed the ever growing population.

By the onset of the Old Kingdom the population had reached 1.5 million, and the sparsely inhabited delta was being actively settled. A figure of 3 million seems reasonable for the late New Kingdom, and densities for several of the provinces may have reached as high as 500 people per square kilometer (Newman 1995: 44).

In Egypt, the state religion played a dominant role (Trigger 1993). The *pharaoh* was considered to be the giver of fertility and prosperity. This ideology had as consequence that once, when a serious drought scourged Egypt, the then ruler, Pepi II, was accused of inability and lost as a consequence his sacred legitimacy, and the Old Kingdom collapsed (Morris 2006: 60–62; Butzer 2012). These developments were not caused by circumscription, population pressure or war.

In the light of the data presented above there is no reason to consider Carneiro's theories as generally valid.

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