
Was the Chieftdom a Congelation of Ideas?

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Which of you by taking thought can
add one cubit onto his stature?

Matthew 6:27

The pioneer American sociologist Lester F. Ward thought of the rise of the state as ‘the result of an extraordinary exercise of the rational ... faculty’, an achievement so exceptional that ‘it must have been the emanation of a single brain or a few concerting minds...’ (Ward 1883, 2: 224).

Nor was Ward’s espousal of ideas as the paramount factors in political evolution unique for his time. The Enlightenment had substituted the mind of man for the will of God as the prime mover of human history, and those who followed made free use of ideas in accounting for the origin of a multitude of institutions. Let us look at some expressions of this view.

In his *Corns de Philosophic Positive*, Auguste Comte (1830–1842, 1: 48) affirmed that ‘it cannot be necessary to prove to anybody who reads this work that ideas govern and overthrow the world...’ And Comte’s English disciple, John Stuart Mill (1856, 2: 517), believed that ‘the order of human progress in all respects will mainly depend on the order of progression in the intellectual convictions of mankind...’ Ralph Waldo Emerson, who according to Leslie White (1949: 279) ‘provided the intelligentsia of America

with the verbal reflexes called ‘thought», declared that ‘always the thought is prior to the fact; all the facts of history preexist in the mind ... Every revolution was first a thought in one man’s mind...’ (Emerson n.d.a : 1–2).

The English historian Lord Acton, best known for his aphorism about power and corruption, gave one of the clearest expressions of the idealist position regarding the course of history:

...a strong materialistic tendency pervades a very popular portion of our literature. But what is really wanted, and what we ought to claim of our historians is the reverse of this. If history is to be understood as an intellectual, and not a natural process, it must be studied as the history of the mind. And he went on to say:

Deeds as well as words are the sign of thought: and if we consider only external events, without following the course of ideas of which they are the expression and the result, ...we shall have but a lame notion of history... (quoted in Lally 1942: 216)¹.

With the rise of social science, however, a profound change began to occur in the way human history was interpreted. Material conditions began to be assigned a larger role in history. Nonetheless, several 19th-century anthropologists still clung to a belief in the dominant role of ideas. Adolf Bastian, according to Gimpowicz (1899: .38, 38-39), ‘attributes all social phenomena to human thought... With him thoughts are always primary and deeds are an emanation from them...’ In much the same terms, Colonel A. H. Pitt-Rivers (1906: 21) spoke of ‘the science of culture in which the subjects treated are emanations from the human mind...’

Perhaps the strongest statement of ‘ideological determinism’ in anthropology is to be found in the writings of Sir James Frazer (1913: 168):

The more we study the inward workings of society and the progress of civilization, the more clearly shall we perceive how both are governed by the influence of thoughts which, springing up at first we know not how or whence in a few superior minds, gradually spread till they have leavened the whole inert lump... of mankind.

Nor did this viewpoint come to an end with the maturing of the social sciences. Indeed, it has its share of advocates among sociologists and anthropologists today. Talcott Parsons, perhaps the most influential sociologist of his generation, maintained that ‘the basic differentiating factors in socio-cultural evolution [are] much more

«ideal» ... than they are «material»...’ (Parsons 1972: 5). And again, ‘...I believe that, within the social system, the normative elements are more important for social change than the «material elements»...’ (Parsons 1966: 113).

Robert Redfield (1955: 30) held a similar view:

The world of men is made up in [the] first place of ideas and ideals. If one studies the rise of urban communities out of more primitive communities, it is the change in the mental life, in norms and in aspirations, in personal character, too, that becomes the most significant aspect of the transformation.

It is the aim of this paper to look closely at just what might be meant when theorists assert the primacy of ideas in the evolution of culture. And in particular, I would like to assess how successful such an approach might be in accounting for the first major step in political evolution - the rise of the chiefdom.

Cultural Materialist Interpretations

Alongside the view that ideas are the prime movers of culture, there grew up among the early evolutionists the opposite notion - that customs, beliefs, and institutions could better be explained by referring them to the material conditions which preceded and accompanied them.

To be sure, the two opposing views did not always occur separately and unalloyed. The same scholar might express a materialist view in one regard and an idealist view in another. Lewis H. Morgan, for example, looked toward essentially ideological determinants to account for social institutions, but to material ones to account for mechanical inventions. And a similar ‘dualism’ can be found in the writings of E. B. Tylor (see Carneiro [1973: 99–100, 102–104] for an extended discussion of this point).

Herbert Spencer, the third great 19th-century evolutionist, was more consistently in the materialist camp. Or at least, he was seldom found in the camp of the idealists. Thus, in rebutting Comte’s contention that ‘ideas govern and overthrow the world’, Spencer (1891: 128) maintained that ‘ideas do not govern and overthrow the world: the world is governed or overthrown by feelings, to which ideas serve only as guides’. And in discussing political evolution Spencer (1890: 395) summed up his views of social causa-

tion by stating that, 'as with the genesis of simple political heads, so with the genesis of compound political heads, conditions and not intentions determine'.

The inclination to look for the determinants of social forms in environment, technology, subsistence, economics, and the like, has grown in anthropology, receiving support in the work of such men as Clark Wissler, Julian Steward, Leslie White, and Marvin Harris. In fact, those anthropologists who make a particular study of political evolution today, be they archeologists or ethnologists, generally adopt a cultural materialist approach to this problem.

The idealist position, though, as I have noted, is by no means dead. The last two decades have seen a resurgence of interest in the symbolic and ideological aspects of culture. All well and good. But it is one thing to elicit, record, and interpret the system of ideas of a people, and quite another to elevate these ideas to a position of causal primacy in accounting for the socio-political structure of their society. Yet there is still a marked tendency to do just this. The legacy of Robert Redfield is alive and well at the University of Chicago and elsewhere. Indeed, it may even be spreading. Accordingly, it may not be out of place to issue a warning: 'Idealitis' is not only contagious but virulent. Still, the situation is by no means hopeless. Where it is too late to prevent the affliction, it may not be too late to prescribe an antidote and effect a cure. At any rate, let us try.

The specific aim of this paper, as I have said, is to see how valid it is to account for the rise of the chieftdom in ideological terms. But since this problem is but part of a larger issue - the value of ideological explanations in accounting for cultural forms generally - it seems fitting to attack the larger question first before focusing on the smaller one.

The Nature Of The Problem

Now, exactly what do theorists have in mind when they assert that ideas lie at the root of the chieftdom, or of any other institution? Is such an assertion any more than a statement of the obvious? After all, every human action that is not physically coerced is preceded by an idea. I pick up a stone and throw it at a tree because I first conceived the **idea** of doing so. Ideas are necessary antecedent states of mind preceding almost any human action. And if this

is all there is to ‘ideological determinism’, it seems trivial indeed. **Of course** ideas must precede actions and create the volitions that are implemented by those actions. My pen will not move an inch unless I decide **I want it to**. Charlemagne would not have crowned himself Emperor of the Franks had he not conceived the idea of doing so. But what do we gain in explanatory power by restating something that is necessary and self-evident? Nothing. Indeed, we lose by it. We lose because we have created the **illusion** of an explanation where none exists.

Ideas may be necessary preconditions for any action, but just because they are the **proximate** cause does not make them the **ultimate** cause. Ideas cannot be accepted as **given**; they must be traced to their source. And their source is always the **matrix of conditions** out of which they arose, not the individual in whose mind their elements happened to combine. The thought may be father to the deed, but conditions are always father to the thought. Ideas have consequences, but they also have causes.

Thus in human behavior an Idea forms but an intermediate link, a middle term, between a Condition and an Outcome. Only if we truncate the chain of causation do we come away with the notion that the cause-and-effect relationship involved is:

Idea → Outcome,

instead of the fuller sequence:

Condition → Idea → Outcome.

But now, if ideas invariably result from a nexus of preceding conditions, are we not more likely to advance our quest for the origin of institutions if we abandon our fixation on ideas and apply ourselves to ferreting out these conditions?

To deny this is, in effect, to argue that the ideas that transform societies are ones that come from deep within the psyche of a few gifted individuals, arising there, pure and pristine, untainted by any contact with surrounding conditions. This view, of course, has had its advocates. It is implicit in the dictum of Ralph Waldo Emerson (n.d.b: 38) that ‘an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man...’ It is explicit in the statement by William James (1880: 458) that the great inventions of history, social as well as mechanical, ‘were flashes of genius in an individual head, of which the outer environment showed no sign’.

We find this view again in James Breasted's attempt to attribute the origin of monotheism to the uncommon genius of one man, the pharaoh Ikhnaton:

Until Ikhnaton, the history of the world had been but the irresistible drift of tradition... Ikhnaton was the first individual in history. Consciously and deliberately, by intellectual process he gained his position, and then placed himself squarely in the face of tradition and swept it away (quoted in White 1949: 237)².

These statements clearly show that one of the dangers of an ideological interpretation of history is the ease with which it slides over into the quicksand of the Great Man Theory. And, at least since the time of Herbert Spencer, it has been recognized that there are insuperable difficulties with the view that the great cultural advances were due to Great Ideas generated by Great Men. The main difficulty with this view is, of course, How are Great Men to be accounted for? Why, for instance, was there such a dense clustering of geniuses in Athens from the 6th to the 4th centuries B. C and virtually none thereafter?

Those who place their faith in the Great Man or the Genius freely admit that they find no way of accounting for him. John Fiske (quoted in Payne 1900: 142), for example, believed that 'the social philosopher must simply accept geniuses as data, just as Darwin accepts his spontaneous variations'. And Justin Kaplan (1983: 250), a Pulitzer Prize winning biographer, affirms that 'the Genius works in a dazzling darkness of his own which normal modes of explanation hardly penetrate'.

Earlier we saw that James Frazer attributed the progress of civilization to ideas issuing from 'a few superior minds'. In the same place, Frazer (1913: 168) went on to say:

The origin of such mental variations, with all their far-reaching train of social consequences, is just as obscure as is the origin of such physical variations on which, if biologists are right, depends the evolution of the species... Perhaps the same Unknown cause which determines the one set of variations gives rise to the other...

'Genius', then, is unfathomable and inexplicable. What a 'genius' creates is singular and unique, defying all laws and surpassing rational understanding.

Needless to say, this way of looking at the mainsprings of history is the antithesis of science. Indeed, it is anathema to science. The job of science is to find the network of causes that renders everything intelligible. Science does not entertain the existence of phenomena that are inherently incomprehensible. If anything, it denies their existence. Or at least it makes every effort to unmask any phenomenon that poses as incomprehensible.

Science, therefore, rejects out of hand William James' contention that inventions are 'flashes of genius in an individual head, of which the outer environment showed no sign'. And it should be noted that in the very next issue of the journal that carried James' views on this subject there appeared a vigorous rejoinder to them by Grant Allen. Wrote Allen (1881: 381):

Dr. James's 'fortuitous' and 'spontaneous' variations, however carefully he may veil them, are merely long names for miracles... [T]he theory of spontaneous variations accidentally producing genius ... is nothing more than a deification of Caprice, conceived as an entity capable of initiating changes outside of the order of physical causation.³

Thus, when an idea is said to be unaccountable, the gauntlet is automatically thrown down to social science. And the challenge is to discover the circumstances out of which this 'unaccountable' idea arose; to reveal it as the determinate outcome of specifiable conditions.

Each of the great ideas of history – the domestication of plants, the smelting of ores, positional notation, gravitation, evolution, relativity, etc. – may indeed have coalesced in an individual mind. But in each case the idea was a synthesis of other ideas that already existed and were active in the culture. And without these preexisting, interacting elements, the synthesis would not have occurred. Could Newton have formulated the law of universal gravitation had he not had, as stepping stones, Galileo's law of falling bodies and the observations of planetary motions by Brahe, Kepler, and Copernicus?

Rather than bolts of lightning issuing from the minds of geniuses, inventions can more realistically be regarded as new conjunctions of cultural elements arising from the operation of the culture process. What we call the culture process has been described by Leslie White (1950: 76)

as a stream of interacting cultural elements – of instruments, beliefs, customs, etc. In this interactive process, each element impinges upon others and is in turn acted upon by them. The process is a competitive one: instruments, customs and beliefs may become obsolete and eliminated from the stream. New elements are incorporated from time to time. New combinations and syntheses – inventions and discoveries – of cultural elements are continually being formed...

A 'genius' is someone favourably positioned in this process so that he is at the confluence or vortex of converging cultural streams, and can catch and ride the new eddies and currents being formed. He is the fortunate vehicle through which a new cultural synthesis takes place. As Edward Beesly (1861: 171) phrased it more than a century ago, 'Men of genius ... influence their age precisely in proportion as they comprehend and identify with its spirit'.

Culture traits, of course, do not act on each other independently of people and the thoughts that occur in their heads. The human brain is the receptacle into which the immaterial aspects of culture are poured. And it is not just a passive receptacle. It is a neurological mixmaster, in which ideas continually act and react on one another, giving rise on rare occasions to a new 'blend'. However, the properties of this new blend of cultural elements – the invention or discovery – depend, not on the properties of the blender, but on the ingredients that went into it.

The content of an invention thus depends on the cultural milieu in which the inventor finds himself. If this milieu does not provide a fit environment for its formation, the new idea will simply not emerge, the cultural synthesis will not take place. The idea of parliamentary government, for example, could scarcely have arisen in the mind of an Aurignacian reindeer hunter. Nor could an Australian aborigine have invented the calculus. Indeed, had Isaac Newton been born an Arunta he would not have invented it either. But someone else would have. Indeed, someone else did. Independently of Newton, and almost contemporaneously with him, Leibniz also invented the calculus. Are we forced to ascribe this occurrence to an extraordinary and fortuitous coincidence? Not at all. It was simply a matter of both Newton and Leibniz being immersed or positioned in the same maturing stream of mathematical ideas.

This and hundreds of other instances of simultaneous but independent inventions and discoveries show that when the time is ripe – when the culture process has advanced to the requisite point – an idea will occur to more than one mind at the same time. No better proof than this is needed to show that great inventions are not inexplicable emanations from inscrutable minds. Rather, they are determinate outcomes of evolving and converging streams of culture.

Let us return for a moment to the Arunta. The reason the Arunta never invented the calculus was not because of any genetic deficiency. Nothing leads us to suppose that among them, as among any human population, there would not have been a sprinkling of individuals with the superior neurological equipment required to invent the calculus. Their failure to do so lay not in their genes but in their culture. Had their culture, and, especially, their mathematical tradition, been comparable to that of mid-17th-century England, some gifted Arunta might well have achieved this cultural synthesis.

The British sociologist Morris Ginsberg (1932: 74) made the same point decades ago:

It seems probable ... that the proportion of gifted men produced is fairly constant, while the expression or realization of their potentialities awaits and depends upon opportunities provided by the occasions of exceptional stir and exhilaration present in the epochs of progress.

Thus, Kroeber (1948: 339) noted, ‘only a fraction of all the men congenitally equipped for genius ever actualize as such. Only a fraction are ever found out, or allowed the rank by history’.

Mark Twain (1961: 151–152) expressed this same idea in a characteristically striking way:

Thousands of geniuses live and die undiscovered – either by themselves or by others. But for the Civil War, Lincoln and Grant, Sherman and Sheridan would not have been discovered, nor have risen into notice. I have touched upon this matter in a small book... *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*. When Stormfield arrived in heaven he was eager to get a sight of those unrivaled and incomparable military geniuses, Caesar, Alexander and Napoleon, but was told by an old resident of heaven that they didn't amount to much there as military geniuses, that they ranked as obscure corporals only, by comparison with a certain colossal genius, a shoemaker by trade, who had lived and died unknown in a New England village and never seen a battle in all his earthly life. He had not been dis-

covered while he was in the earth but heaven knew him as soon as he arrived there and lavished upon him the honors he would have received ... if the earth had known that he was the most prodigious military genius the planet had ever produced⁴.

Thoughts – ideas – are both **constrained** and **impelled**. **Constrained** because circumstances may greatly narrow what may be thought. (Could the most brilliant Yahgan who ever lived, shivering on the rocky coast of Tierra del Fuego, have possibly formulated the Second Law of Thermodynamics?) **Impelled** because once the right circumstances are present, certain ideas seem to spring up irresistibly, and individuals caught in the vortex of these swirling cultural elements are virtually **forced** to synthesize them. If anyone doubts this, listen to Herbert Spencer (1926, 2: 460):

Once having become possessed by the conception of Evolution in its comprehensive form, the desire to elaborate and set it forth was so strong that to have passed life in doing something else would, I drink, have been almost intolerable.

What must we conclude, then, about those who affirm the primacy of ideas in begetting cultural change? If all they mean to say is that ideas are a necessary middle term between conditions and consequences, then their argument is obvious and trivial. But if they hold that culture advances only because uniquely gifted individuals are able to generate singular thoughts, quite independently of surrounding conditions, then their argument is demonstrably false.

The Implementation Of Ideas

Even granting the importance of ideas, no matter how original and brilliant an idea might be, by itself it is not enough. It must be implanted in a seed bed which will allow it to germinate, burgeon, and flower. Who knows if some shambling Neanderthal ‘genius’, earnestly cogitating behind his sloping brow, may not, at some point in his life, have conceived the idea of a chieftdom? But it is one thing to conceive, quite another to effectuate. And the cultural conditions that prevailed during the Middle Paleolithic were simply not conducive to the rise of chieftdoms. This would have been just as true, moreover, had Caesar or Alexander or Napoleon - or even the New England cobbler! - been born a Neanderthal. Chieftdoms did not arise until suitable conditions were present. And when they

were, chiefdoms sprang up in many, parts of the world, like mushrooms after a summer storm. As Herbert Spencer put it, ‘conditions and not intentions determine’.

The Basis Of Chiefdoms

Of course, one needs to ask, what **were** the conditions that gave rise to the chiefdom? And, given these conditions, what ‘ideas’ were then generated in people’s minds to provide the link between conditions and consequences?

As I have discussed elsewhere (Carneiro 1970, 1981) several factors led Neolithic villages to transcend local autonomy and create the multi-village political units we call chiefdoms. These conditions were, essentially, the presence of agriculture, the existence of environmental or social circumscription, population pressure, and warfare. Together, they formed the necessary and sufficient conditions that triggered the process. Almost irresistibly they led to the rise of chiefdoms, and then, in more limited areas, to the emergence of the state.

Now, into what sorts of ideas would these conditions have been translated as chiefdoms began to be formed? The ideas involved, it seems to me, would have been few and simple, and could have occurred to any ordinary mind. They amounted to little more than this:

1. Defeat neighboring villages by force of arms.
2. Incorporate them and their territory into your political unit.
3. Take prisoners of war and make them work for you as slaves.
4. Use your close supporters to administer conquered territory if local leaders prove rebellious.
5. Require your subjects to pay tribute to you periodically.
6. Require them also to provide fighting men in time of war.

These scant half-dozen ideas were quite enough to provide the intellectual armamentarium involved in creating a chiefdom. Could any half-dozen ideas be simpler? Could they not have occurred to anyone? Could they fail to occur to a village chief faced with the problem of insufficient land and covetous neighbors?

That these ideas were indeed simple and did occur to many a chief is amply demonstrated by the facts. Look around the world during late Neolithic and early Bronze Age times and you find **hundreds** of chiefdoms emerging. Moreover, in terms of their ba-

sic structure, they all looked pretty much alike. In fact, the more we learn about chieftdoms, the more we are struck by the similarities and regularities they possess. And multiple recurrences of the same phenomenon are, of course, the sworn enemy of 'strokes of genius', or ideas of which 'the environment gave no outward sign'. Quite the contrary. Rather than subtle, abstruse, and profound, the ideas that underlay the chieftdom were easy and obvious. Thus chieftdoms themselves were the predictable and inescapable outcome of a specifiable set of circumstances. Whenever these conditions were present, chieftdoms arose. It was that simple.

The idea of a harsh, despotic, military basis for the chieftdom, which I proposed above, does not appeal to everyone. Many find it uncongenial and look instead for some theory that denies or abates the element of force. Such persons would find solace and comfort in passages which appear to contradict a martial and autocratic view of the nature of chieftdoms. Thus, they might eagerly seize upon John Adair's characterization of chiefly power among the Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Cherokee at the time he visited them.

... they have no words to express despotic power, arbitrary kings, oppressed or obedient subjects. The power of their chiefs is an empty sound. They can only persuade or dissuade the people either by the force of good-nature and clear reasoning or colouring things so as to suit their prevailing passions (quoted in Peebles 1983: 185).

But as Christopher Peebles has made clear, the state of affairs Adair was describing was that of 1775, and not the aboriginal condition of southeastern chieftdoms. It was, in fact, the product of more than 200 years of disruption and deculturation, resulting directly or indirectly from European contact. During the 16th century, before this disruption had occurred, the chieftdoms of the Southeast were ruled by powerful and intimidating military leaders. Thus, an early Spanish chronicler known as the Gentleman of Elvas wrote as follows of Tastaluca, a paramount chief encountered by de Soto's expedition:

Before his dwelling, on a high place, was spread a mat for him, upon which two cushions were placed, one above the other, to which he went and sat down, his men placing themselves around, some way removed, so that an open circle was formed about him, the Indians of the highest rank being nearest his person. One of them shaded him from the sun with a

circular umbrella... It formed the standard of the Chief, which he carried into battle. His appearance was full of dignity: he was tall of person, muscular, lean and symmetrical. He was the suzerain of many territories, and of numerous people, being equally feared by his vassals and neighboring nations (quoted in Peebles 1983: 184).

Only with the passage of time and the reversal of their fortunes were the once-powerful chiefdoms of the Southeast 'transformed into essentially egalitarian societies made up of independent communities knit together into loose confederacies' (Peebles 1983: 185).

Ideology As a Validation Of Realty

As Karl Hutterer has noted, 'power is validated by its exercise'. That is to say, the most effective way to make power recognized and accepted is to wield it. Thus an Inca emperor, finding himself with 20,000 men mobilized for work and nothing for them to do, had them move a hill from one place to another, and when they were finished, had them move it back. More than all the dazzling emblems and elaborate rituals of his office, it was acts of this kind that made the Inca respected and obeyed.

Is there no way, then, to rescue ideology from the scrap heap of causal explanations to which we appear to have consigned it? Perhaps there is. But if ideology can be said to have served a significant function in the life of a chiefdom, it was more in its maintenance than in its creation. Ideology can be seen to play a role in proclaiming and sustaining the authority of a paramount chief after that authority has first been established by force of arms.

Once a chiefdom is in place, its leader still faces a severe challenge: to make loyal, tax-paying subjects out of people who, shortly before, were his sworn enemies. Created by naked force though it was, a chiefdom must at some point begin to loosen the reins. The iron fist begins to don a velvet glove. Efforts are made to soften oppression, or at least to justify it. In time, a harsh **fait accompli** is made to seem the natural and proper order of things. And achieving this transformation entails the creation of an **ideology** – a nexus of myths, symbols, and rituals, of rationalizations and exhortations, all meant to make tolerable, and perhaps even pleasant, that which must be borne.

Although an ideology may grow up slowly and fitfully, it may eventually become an elaborate, coherent, and compelling system

of beliefs and practices. And if promoted effectively, this ideology may in time penetrate so deeply into a chieftdom's traditions as to obscure and belie its true roots. The ruthless conquests of a military despot may, in a few generations, become transmogrified into a peaceful and benevolent joining of willing peoples by an ancient leader who, if not a god himself, was at least guided by a divine hand.

And if later generations of subjects thus come to be misled about how the chieftdom really arose, is it any wonder that anthropologists, wrestling with this same problem centuries later have been misled too?

The Two Aspects Of Ideology

Ideology has a double edge. It is persuasive and it is coercive. Durkheim was right when he said that rules of conduct 'are not only external to the individual but are, moreover, endowed with coercive power by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him...' (quoted in White 1949: 146). Implanted in an individual, cultural norms may incite a person to act, no less than the point of a sword. But culture operates most effectively the less coercive it appears. People follow rules more willingly the more these rules seem, not mandates from above, but impulses from within. One complies most readily when spoken to by that wee small voice of conscience, unaware that, as Shakespeare shrewdly saw, 'Policy sits above conscience' (*Timon of Athens*, Act III, Scene 2).

Erich Fromm put the matter very neatly when he said, 'a society works best when people **want** to do what they **have** to do'. Paramount chiefs, therefore, see to it that ideas of duty, allegiance, and fealty are instilled in their subjects. In this way, as I have said, onerous and even odious tasks, like obeying restrictive laws, paying taxes, and risking life and limb in time of war, are made bearable. Indeed, if sufficiently imbued with societal goals, subjects come to feel that fulfilling these demands is their patriotic duty. And when devotion to duty is conspicuously rewarded with honor, glory, fame, and rank, compliance with the desires and interests of the chief becomes even more assured. Let me present just one example of this. Ordinarily, paying taxes is regarded as a cheerless burden, but Fijian chiefs had found a way to make it a festive occasion:

Tax-paying in Fiji, unlike that in Britain, - wrote the missionary Thomas Williams, - is associated with all that the people love. The time of its taking place is a high day; a day for the best attire, the pleasantest looks, and the kindest words; a day for display: whales' teeth and cowrie necklaces, orange-cowrie and pearl-shell breast ornaments, the scarlet frontlet, the newest style of neck-band, ...the most graceful turban, powder of jet black and rouge of the deepest red, are all in requisition on that festive day. The coiffure that has been in process for months is now shown in perfection; the beard, long nursed, - receives extra attention and the finishing touch; the body is anointed with the most fragrant oil, and decorated with the gayest flowers and most elegant vines...

The Fijian carries his tribute with every demonstration of joyful excitement, of which all the tribe concerned fully partake. Crowds of spectators are assembled, and the king and his suite are there to receive the impost, which is paid in with a song and a dance, and received with smiles and applause. From this scene the tax-payers retire to partake of a feast provided by their king.

And then Williams adds: 'Surely the policy that can thus make the paying of taxes "a thing of joy", is not contemptible' (Williams 1870: 31-32).

So again we see that the heavier the overlay of rituals, the likelier a chiefs subjects are to act, as they believe, for the greater good of society. And of course this eases the problems of the chief in his continuing efforts to keep his chiefdom firmly under control.

Now, when political obligations, lightened in this way, are in addition infused with religious meanings and sanctions, the silken cord of ideological coercion is drawn still tighter. When the desire of the chief becomes also the will of the gods, and compliance with it is rewarded with promises of a glorious hereafter, or other supernatural recompense, who would willingly demur? And to stiffen the spine of those who might, there is often added the threat of swift and terrible reprisals by the gods if they should fail.

As I suggested earlier, so overlaid with religious trappings may a chiefdom (or a state) become as to give the false impression that, from its inception, it was a peaceful theocracy. The actual scenario, though, might have been as follows. A chiefdom, arisen by conquest, might eventually push its boundaries to their natural geographic limits, after which warfare might cease, or at least greatly diminish for lack of enemies to fight. Thus shorn of his original

military role, the paramount chief might then begin to arrogate onto himself more and more religious attributes and functions, seeking by this means to maintain his power. In time, a chieftdom might take on all the trappings of a peaceful theocracy, and someone observing it at this stage might easily project this absence of war, coupled with the elaborate religious role of the chief, back to the chieftdom's very beginnings. Yet, if we knew the early history of the chieftdom, we would clearly discern its martial origins. If we must paint the primal chieftdom in bold colors, then, it is more accurate to depict it as a secular military despotism than as a peaceful theocracy.

One word of caution. An increase in ritual, myth, and symbol should not always be taken to indicate a corresponding increase in political control. Quite the opposite may be true. In an interesting paper, Martin R. Doornbos has called attention to the fact that an efflorescence of ceremonialism in a chieftdom or state may actually mask its decline and impending dissolution. Based on his study of the Kingdom of Ankole in East Africa, Doornbos (1985: 25, 34) writes:

...even if a political institution is increasingly decorated with gilt and glitter, its actual functions may, nevertheless, be subject to decay. And when most references to an institution begin to be concerned with its pomp and circumstance and no longer with any effective ... role it might have had, then it is not unreasonable to suspect that it has lost the essence of its former role and position... [A]n inverse correlation is again suggested, namely, the greater the ceremonialization of a particular role, the weaker the actual 'command' powers of its incumbents.

Before a chieftdom or state reaches its senescence, though, its ideology may well reflect something of its particular nature and structure. Thus, even if we know only the ideology of a polity, we may be able to infer a number of other things about it. Consider religious iconography, which is often the material embodiment, in art, of certain ideas important to a society. And take, for example, Chavin, whose total culture is very imperfectly known. Of the little we know of Chavin, much of it comes from its ideology, as reflected in its religious iconography. And while others may read it differently, to me this art denotes a strong military basis to Chavin society. And if a strong and far-reaching religious superstructure -

a church – characterized Chavin, it was a church militant, acting in the service of a militant state. Otherwise, why should the dominant symbols of Chavin religion have been such creatures as jaguars and eagles instead of, say, guinea pigs and butterflies?

Similarities Of Structure And Their Meaning

The more we look at chiefdoms around the world – in the Southeast, the Circum-Caribbean, west, central, and east Africa, Polynesia, etc. – the more we are struck by the similarities in their structure. And this is true not only of their gross anatomy, but of their fine details as well. Thus we find many traits occurring in chiefdom after chiefdom: the chief having the power of life and death over his subjects, his indulgence in polygyny, his being carried on a litter, the making of obeisances to him, burial in a special grave along with his wives and retainers, etc., etc. And, as we noted before, the more parallels we find in the organization of chiefdoms, the more they can be seen as a normal, determinate, predictable, and even inevitable stage of social evolution, and conversely, the less they will seem the result of a singular and fortuitous concurrence of uncommon ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

It is now time to summarize. If ideas necessarily precede action, then ideas must indeed be the precursors of all that was involved in the rise of the chiefdom. However, ideas are not uncaused causes. They do not spring from indeterminate and unfathomable sources. Nor are the ideas underlying a chiefdom so abstruse and profound as to have required a prodigious intelligence to formulate them. The conditions that brought the chiefdom into being were simple, widespread, and recurring. And in explaining the rise of the chiefdom we are likelier to succeed if we look carefully at these conditions than if we try to penetrate the minds of those individuals who were shaped by them.

NOTES

¹ Any number of expressions of this view can be cited. Thus, the American cleric Francis H. Johnson (1884: 638) thought it an 'incontestable fact that mind is the sole originating cause of which we have any knowledge...', adding that 'in our experience of real causation the process is uniformly not from matter to mind, but from mind to matter'. And the distinguished British historian John B. Bury (1930: 46), spoke of 'history, in which thought is the characteristic and guiding force...'

² A reliance on 'geniuses' as the prime movers of culture finds occasional expression in anthropology as well. Thus, Robert H. Lowie (1940: 25) wrote:

The tremendous importance of farming, then, lies not in what it did for mankind when first introduced but what it was capable of achieving after being itself greatly improved. The expert farmers of Peru could maintain a population of possibly three million. This meant a chance for more geniuses to be born ...

For other instances of anthropologists invoking 'genius' to account for cultural advance see Wissler (1923: 331), Childe (1935: 5-6), Swanton (1930: 368), Boas (1945: 76), and Kenyon (1959: 40).

³ Even before William James proclaimed it so unabashedly, J. F. McLennan (1876: 231) was familiar with this mode of thought and heaped scorn upon it, calling it, in Dugald Stewart's words, 'the indolent philosophy which refers to a miracle whatever appearance both in the natural and moral worlds it is unable to explain'. (For leading me to this passage I am indebted to George W. Stocking, Jr. [1987: 168]).

⁴ Another aspect of the question of genius, but one which receives scant attention, is that of a person with little more than average intelligence who, because he is thrust by circumstances into a particularly favorable position, is able to make a great cultural synthesis. In my opinion, Charles Darwin lacked the intellectual acuity of some of his contemporaries, such as Herbert Spencer or Thomas Henry Huxley. Yet, by applying the intelligence he had to a major problem, and doing so with extraordinary tenacity, he was able to achieve what was probably the most far-reaching intellectual triumph of all time.

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