
On Chiefs and Chiefdoms*

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ABSTRACT

The type of political leader, commonly referred to as ‘chief’, emerged some ten thousand years ago, since the time that larger congregations of people had become possible when the changes in climate made agriculture and settled life possible (Cook 2005: 24–28). And, though the term ‘chief’ was used over and over again in anthropological, archaeological, and even historical literature, the contents of the concept was never fully agreed upon. Most anthropologists would include any, or most, of the following aspects in his or her definition: an ascribed/inherited top position in the local (regional) social structure, a central position in a redistributive economy, sacred capacities (the most important of which were alleged positive effects on human, animal and plant fertility), the erection of great works in the public sphere, and an inclination to warfare. I shall discuss each of these features with their ramifications below.

GENERAL REMARKS

Chiefs are considered as sociopolitical leaders of a number of people – in the thousands, as Earle suggests (Earle 1991: 1; 1997: 14), which is not always the case. To distinguish the chief from other sociopolitical leaders some additional characteristics have to be added to this rather broad definition. In the first place a chief is an ascribed leader; he occupies a hereditary position (Service 1971: 146–147). Such positions are, in Kurtz terminology, *political offices*.¹ Chiefship is the prerogative of a certain family. When the old chief dies his son or sometimes a brother or a nephew will succeed him. In this way he is different from a big man, or a president. These are leaders with an achieved position, they are elected, and they have done something to get into that place. Neither can chiefs do without achievement; also they have to demonstrate the ability

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to rule their people. It is not quite possible to distinguish between chiefs and kings. The major difference between a strong chief and a weak head of state (king) is the kind and degree of power the office provides him. One might say that a king is the ruler of a kingdom – but this obliges us to make clear the difference between chiefdom and kingdom, and, as the differences between a paramount chiefdom and a tiny kingdom are very small, this is not a helpful criterion (cf. Carneiro 1981: 47). Perhaps, we should look for differences in power. It is generally assumed that chiefs do not have the legitimate right to enforce decisions, but they often do so, legitimate or not (Pospisil 1984; Allen 1984 on the east Aoba; Sturtevant 1978 on the Natchez). Kings, on the other hand, do have such a right even though in practice they do not always succeed in doing so (Service 1975: 16; Claessen 2005: 234).² To look for the distinguishing feature seems rather unfruitful thus (cf. Skalník 2004: 79–81).

A second major characteristic of chiefs is that in some way or another they are considered as sacred persons. It is believed that they have descended, often in a most unclear way, from gods, spirits or mythical forefathers and because of that are regarded as a source of special powers. The most important of the latter is an ability to influence the fertility of women, cattle and land in a positive way. This ideologically based position gives a strong legitimation to a chief's leadership.

These statements are based upon a wide reading of the anthropological literature, which makes clear that chiefs – in the anthropological sense mentioned above – are found all over the world and in all times (Skalník 2004). It is therefore a bit surprising that the concomitant concept of 'chiefdom' goes back only to 1955 when Oberg formulated it for the first time in political terms (Carneiro 1981: 39–41). Once having been introduced, however, the term 'chiefdom' soon abounded in the literature, but with a great deal of variation in content.

Widely though the ideas about chiefs (and chiefdoms) may differ, the view that the chief's position is inherited seems generally accepted. There is not so much differentiation possible here, though matrilineal societies have different ideas about inheritance from patrilineal societies. The difference between matrilineal and patrilineal chiefdoms is vast; some of the strongest chiefdoms occur in matrilineal societies that have patrilocal residence; the combination of these features allows men from different descent associa-

tions living together in patrilocal villages to compete for political power as they would be constrained from doing in patrilineal/patrilocal settings where strong kin relations prevail among the men (Allen 1984; Kurtz 2001, 2004). This type of chiefdoms occurs mainly in Melanesia (Allen 1984; Uberoi 1971). There is a lot of variation in the *ideological* aspects of chiefship, however, as appears from a comparison of Sub-Saharan Africa and Polynesia.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

In great parts of Sub-Saharan Africa the dominant ideology is that long ago a person (man? woman? group?) opened the earth (using digging stick, plough, pick, felled trees or as first fished in a lake or a river) and in doing so made contact with the spirits of the earth. After some negotiations they concluded a sort of contract, in which it was laid down that in return for certain sacrifices and rituals, these 'first' would gain access to the fertility possessed by these spirits, which justified his becoming a chief or an earth priest. This access to fertility was inherited within the family (van Binsbergen 1979: 140–141; Kopytoff 1999: 90–91; see Luning 1997; Wilks 1977; Claessen 2000a: 146–147). Other groups who settled in the area would have to come to an agreement with the bearer of fertility. No subjection of the newcomers was required, but they had to recognize the leader if they wanted to partake of his access to fertility. Kopytoff describes this process as a passive one: 'the founding lineage-head finds himself to be a "chief" by simply remaining at the top of a pyramid that grows at the bottom' (Kopytoff 1999: 91; cf. Zuiderwijk 1998: 92), a process Kopytoff elsewhere described as 'levitation' (Kopytoff 1999: 88). This happy situation, however, changed considerably in the course of time, when, as tradition holds in West Africa, a new person – the hunter – entered the village of cultivators, and divided meat there and subsequently was invited to settle down with them. Between the group of the 'hunter' and the group of the cultivators also a kind of 'contract' was concluded. The hunter married the daughter of the chief or the earth priest of the village and in this way obtained legitimately the position of chief, at the same time reserving the influence on fertility for his lineage (Claessen and Oosten 1996: 368–370; Muller 1999; Luning 1997).

Of course, there are variations on this scheme, and even wholly different developments are found. For example, Asombang (1999: 81) tells that the Bafut kingdom of West Cameroon

developed as a loose federation of immigrants who settled among groups already living there. The leader of this federation had political as well as ritual powers associated with the fertility of land and people (*Ibid.*: 82). Of these powers his occult powers were the most important (*Ibid.*: 85).³

The strong association of the chief with fertility also had a dangerous aspect: once people believed that the chief – because of old age, sickness, or invalidity – no longer was able to guarantee fertility they had to get rid of him. According to Muller the solution to this problem was the killing of the chief (Muller 1980, 1981, 2008). The killing was justified because during his inauguration the chief had committed heinous crimes, such as incest, cannibalism and/or killing people. Such an inauguration was necessary; for as every son of a chief was eligible for that position, none of them was already sacred beforehand. The successor had to be made so by rituals. These rituals made him sacred, but at the same time also a criminal. The punishment of his misdeeds was postponed, however, till he began to lose his power over fertility (or, so it was believed). Muller's views find ample confirmation in the older literature (*e.g.*, Meek 1931), as well as in recent studies by Simonse on the southeastern Sudan (Simonse 1992, 2005).

POLYNESIA

The institution of chiefship is found in all Polynesian societies, be it with a different type of legitimacy than that of their African colleagues. There is every reason to think that chiefship was already found in the Ancient Polynesian Culture some two thousand years ago (Kirch and Green 2001: 247–249). Thomas (1990: 28–33) offers a succinct overview of the characteristics of these functionaries, which I will summarize here in broad outlines. The key element of Polynesian chiefship is a genealogical and mythological construction of rank on the basis of successive primogeniture. An elder brother is the ancestor of a metaphorical senior lineage, while the junior lineages trace descent from his younger brother(s). These notional connections are traced all the way back to the first quasi-human deities, so that principal ancestors are linked in a direct way with the first-born chiefly line and in an indirect way only with the rest of society. This social construction is usually called 'ramage'.⁴ The access of ordinary people to the main deities is mediated by the chiefs. Food production is dependent upon certain rituals on behalf of the ancestor gods and the knowledge of

this and the ritual practices themselves were generally monopolized by the chiefs. All land was held under a twofold ownership: a general abstract ownership on the part of the chief and an immediate tenure on the part of the users. The abstract ownership was associated with a flow of goods towards the chief. Some were ritual first fruits in direct acknowledgement of 'the work of the gods'; others were related to his status in a more general way. Since the survival and regeneration of the group as a whole was dependent upon the work of the chief there was a sense that everybody was indebted to him. The well-being and productiveness of the land were seen to flow from a generalized condition of chiefly well-being and chiefly ritual in particular. Thomas further states that the relation between chief and people was asymmetrical, rather than reciprocal. It is here that Thomas's views are in need of some correction (Claessen 2000b: 709). People did indeed pay heavily in labor, food, goods and daughters. The system worked satisfactorily – as long as the chiefs fulfilled their part of the 'deal' by procuring fertility and well-being. Where this was not (or no longer) the case, a chief could be disposed off. Well-known cases of such a deposal are found on Easter Island and in the Marquesas Islands. In both cases the degradation of fertile soil, periods of draught, overpopulation and political tensions occasioned a lower food production, which led to hunger, and finally to the removal of the chiefs. In both cases a kind of shamans took over the religious responsibilities, while a kind of war leaders led local groups against each other in endless fights.⁵

Although the model sketched above may give the impression of quiet, well-governed societies, in actual practice most of the islands were ridden by a fierce status rivalry, a term coined by Goldman (1970). Its cause is the problems with the succession by the eldest, the highest son, for, when there are more sons by several spouses, which of them has the highest status? Is it simply the first-born one, or is it the son by the highest placed wife, who, because of the status of his mother, might have a higher status? In such cases sometimes the advice is sought of old and wise men who know very well the status of every lineage in the island, and soon not only fathers' pedigree, but also the pedigrees of father's line of each of the spouses are investigated – and so on, till finally a decision is reached. In other cases a decision is found after fierce fights between the competing brothers. The 'lower' son usually leaves the village and founds a village of his own somewhere else on

the island – or leaves his society to conclude elsewhere a ‘strategic marriage’ with the daughter of another chief in the hope to succeed her father, or in any case to lay a claim for his son.⁶

With some minor variations this type of chiefship is found all over Polynesia. Referring to Muller's remark on the African situation, also Polynesia is characterized by ‘a single ideological model’ (Muller 1981). There are, of course, large differences in power and wealth between the chiefs of the high islands, such as Hawaii, Tonga and Tahiti, on the one hand, and the small Marquesan chiefs or the chiefs of the Tokelau atolls, on the other hand (Claessen and van Bakel 2006; Huntsman and Hooper 1996), but the underlying principles are the same.

ECONOMIC ASPECTS

It is generally held that chiefs are centers of redistribution, as eloquently described by Service (1971: 137ff.; cf. however, Carneiro 1981: 58–59), and there are certainly arguments in favor of it, for everywhere chiefs collect masses of food and goods, which later are handed out again. With Kirch, however, one may wonder to what extent such handing out qualifies as redistribution. There was indeed a handing-out of (a part of) the goods brought together by the chief (collected as tax, as gifts, as tribute, or whatever other means). To quote Kirch (1984: 39):

In the less stratified societies, in which chiefs were intimately bound to the people through direct ties of kinship, first-fruit offerings and contributions of food and valued goods for major ceremonials were generally redistributed back to the individual households. In the increasing stratified societies, however, this was not the case, and the goods rendered to the chief tended to concentrate near the apex of the socio-political pyramid.

In other words: the goods channeled into the redistributive network were mainly used to support the chiefly hierarchy and to finance the political activities of the ruling elite.

This was not only the case in Polynesia. Earle in his important volume on chiefdoms in general, distinguishes in the economy of chiefdoms staple finance and wealth finance. ‘Staple finance, often in the absence of extensive exchange, involves the mobilization and disbursement of food and technological goods as payment for services’ (Earle 1991: 3). He points in this connection to the giving of feasts. Wealth finance involves ‘the procurement of items of

symbolic value, either through long-distance exchange or patronized craft production, and their bestowal on supporters' (*Ibid.*). He shows that chiefs (as well as other political leaders) regularly brought together great quantities of food and goods, which were invested mainly in the maintenance of their political organization. This was observed already in 1980 by Dalton, and we followed his views in *Early State Economics* (Claessen and van de Velde 1991: 9–13). One may go one step further and see a kind of reciprocity in the system: chiefs bring together goods and hand out considerable parts of it to their elite followers, with the consequence that they themselves often remained poor (Janssen 1984; Sahlins 1963). This was threatening to their position as the loyalty of their followers depended on their being open-handed. A good example of such risks is found in the Germanic tradition of the retinue: the group of fighting men who were loyal to their lord as long as he was (could be) open-handed towards them. Several Germanic nobles ruined themselves completely when trying to bring together large retinues to combat the Roman legions (Roymans 1990: 136–144).

The use of wealth as a means of financing chiefdoms can possibly be brought under the heading of 'prestige goods', a concept recently elaborated by Ekholm (1977), who defined these as products not necessary for material subsistence, but indispensable for the maintenance of social relations (*Ibid.*: 119). Also Earle (1997) in his monograph on the power of chiefs pays a lot of attention to the policy of prestige goods. Such a system only flowers as long as one of the parties can monopolize the introduction of these goods into the system. The need for prestige goods promoted long distance exchange considerably. Van de Velde (1985) points in this respect to the Iron Age Central Europe where the rulers of the *oppida* occupied themselves with long distance trade with the Mediterranean regions. Diepeveen-Jansen (1998) describes several prestige good systems for the La Tène Period (the Late Iron Age) in northeast France (350–150 BC). The power of prestige goods was such that ambitious nobles desired, nay, even needed, these goods (prestige!) and as they could be procured only from the chief they were obliged to support him in order to receive the goods.

In the foregoing it was implied that chiefs somehow could amass food and goods. How did they achieve this? It seems that in small chiefdoms the possibility to levy taxes was limited. A good example of such a situation is found on the Gilbert Islands in Micronesia (Lambert 1966). The land belonged to different descent

groups and thus also the chief had some land. His income fell into three categories (*Ibid.*: 161): the production of his own estate, contributions to his life-crises feasts by the islanders, and, finally, formal deliveries of food in acknowledgement of his ultimate rights on the land (see above). In this way he had sufficient income to maintain his (large) family and to hand out gifts to people, while also great works (such as building a canoe) could be financed by the chief. As most of the food gifts could not be stored for long a quick handing-out (redistribution) was the best solution. In practice the chief depended for his own livelihood on the produce of his own estates. He had but hardly any influence on the amount of goods given to him, nor on the moment in time when they should be delivered. In Sahlins substantial monograph (1958) on production and redistribution in Polynesia a close relation between the size of the island and the possibilities for taxation and redistribution comes to the fore, while also the size and the degree of the socio-political organization were influenced by these factors. In the recent article Claessen and van Bakel (2006: 254) established that a close relation existed between the area of arable land, the number of people and the degree of socio-political leadership. Summarizing: the basis for handing over goods, food, women and labor to the chief was based upon his being considered the (nominal) owner of the land, which entitled him to its yield, and also as a reward for the many tasks he fulfilled for his people: procuring safety, justice, fertility, protection, and the construction of great works.

GREAT WORKS

It was mentioned in the previous section that the chief on the Gilbert Islands was the one who made the building of a canoe possible, an affair so costly that only the chief could order it. The literature on chiefs and chiefdoms abounds with descriptions of great buildings, monuments, religious centers, and what not, the erection of which was made possible by the chief, who ordered its building, organized the builders and financed the works. Especially archaeologists present lengthy and detailed descriptions of such constructions (Carneiro 1981: 53; Renfrew 1973). For instance Diepeveen-Jansen (1998) described numerous large barrow graves in the La Tène Period of northeast France. Bradley (1991) discusses in great detail the construction of the famous monument of Stonehenge and the numerous barrows and causeways that are found in the same region of Wessex. He then compares the developments in that area

and the Thames Valley and demonstrates that in Wessex the binding force was ideology, manifested by the construction of large monuments with ritual functions, which were not found in the Thames Valley. The development of the Wessex chiefdoms seems to have been based on the economy of livestock and 'wild resources' (*Ibid.*: 54). Earle describes Thy of Denmark who similarly based their economy mainly on livestock, but this did not prevent the chiefs from building their round barrows placed upon hills (Earle 1997: 197). For Europe it is especially Renfrew who presents examples of large works from the prehistory, of which the large stone temples on the Maltese island of Gozo get a lot of attention (Renfrew 1973: 102–170). In comparison with these large buildings the Dutch megalithic tombs pale in significance (Bakker 2005), and, perhaps, the same can be said of the rows of large stones at Carnac in the northwest of France (Werner 1984: 99).

Stone monuments are found on all islands of Polynesia, coming in many shapes: the large stone house platforms on the Marquesas Islands (Thomas 1990), the well-known large statues from Easter Island (van Tilburg 1994), the large *marae* (temples) on Tahiti (Oliver 1974), the *langi* (barrows) and the trilithon (stone gate) on Tongatapu (Burley 1998), and the large house mounds, the *tia ave* (defensive sites), terraces and raised ovens on Samoa (Clark 1996: 451). Further to the west, in Indonesia, large works are numerous, from the widely spread megalithic monuments till the stone coffins and the defense works at the island of Nias (Slamet-Velsink 1995: 63–69; Schnitger 1989 [1939]: 111–125). Interestingly, in Bali the large irrigated rice fields, the *sawahs*, including the water works, the terraces, the sluices, the small ditches and the dykes, were constructed by the *subak* – the village rice cultivation co-operatives. These activities were undertaken and organized at the local level. The overarching power-holders, the Balinese *rajas*, had no role in this process (Grader 1984 [1939]; Claessen 2000a: 120).

Also in the Americas great works erected by chiefs are found. One can think of the towns in the Mississippi Valley, of which Cahokia was the largest (O'Brien 1991). Steponaitis presents a description of the site Moundville, the center of a chiefdom based on intensive maize agriculture (900–1600 AD). This site, characterized by four artificial mounds, seems to have dominated several nearby settlements each with only one mound. This made Moundville 'the most important Mississippian settlement in the Black Warrior Valley' (Steponaitis 1991: 195). Elsewhere, in the southwest,

Indian tribes erected the *pueblos*, and earlier the Hohokam built large dwellings in the cliffs. The Plains Indians did not produce great works; probably connected with their nomadic style of life (Lowie 1967 [1948]). The impressive wood works and sculptures of the Northwest Coast Indians should be mentioned in this connection. Here were found settled groups with ambitious leaders, trying to outdo their peers (Drucker 1983). In Middle America and in some regions of South America powerful chiefs ruled, and in these regions numerous great works are found – the *cabezas colosales* of the Olmecs, the temple pyramids of the Mayas, the plazas and temples of the Aztecs, and the fortresses and great roads of the Incas – though most of these seem to be connected with Early States rather than with chiefdoms... Indeed, under favorable circumstances, chiefs organized and financed great works everywhere.

CHIEFS AND WAR

Carneiro (1981: 64) states that ‘one cannot help being impressed by the overwhelming evidence for intensive warfare among these societies [chiefdoms]’ and then sets out to demonstrate how warfare led to the development of chiefdoms. Yet, several lines later, he adds: ‘Chiefdoms may arise without the necessity of actual warfare and conquest’ (*Ibid.*). Yet, he thinks that war is characteristic of chiefdom societies. Earle (1997) has mixed feelings about the role of war in chiefdoms. He stresses that war is usually connected with economic motives, such as the control over prestige goods. In his Model of Complex Political Institutions, however, he gives war a dominant role, adding that for the political leaders it is difficult to keep their warriors under control (*Ibid.*: 203–206). In the large volume *Warfare and Society* (Otto, Thrane, and Vandkilde 2006) the majority of the articles on chiefdoms mention war. Steuer (2006), who studied the role of war bands in the development of states and tribes in the first millennium AD in Europe, however, states that it is difficult to decide archaeologically on wars mentioned by, *e.g.*, Roman authors. He also stresses the difficulties for the leaders to keep the bands together and find sufficient means to pay them.

Interestingly, none of the authors mentioned asks the question to what extent the reported fights really qualify as ‘war’. A definition of the concept of war may at first sight resemble a mere terminological exercise, but the importance that such terms are accorded to in the construction of theories certainly warrants such an exer-

cise. One of the clearest definitions of war was given by Ronald Cohen (1985: 276–277). ‘War is the publicly legitimized and organized offensive and/or defensive deadly violence between polities.’ If we follow this definition most of the so-called tribal wars were no war at all, but rather conflicts, raids, attacks and the like. To give the fight another name, of course, does not diminish its terrible consequences, but puts it more in perspective. Such societies lived in fact in a permanent ‘State of Warre’, a concept formulated in 1642 by the English philosopher Hobbes. This did not mean that such societies suffered of war all the time, but that a ‘State of Warre’ would be permanent because there were no institutions to prevent the conflict (Claessen 2006: 218; Sahlins 1968: 4–6). An example of such a ‘State of Warre’ was found to exist between the Huron and the Iroquois in eastern North America (Morgan 1851: 58; Trigger 1969: 42–53). With regard to the Huron, Heidenreich (1978: 385) even states that ‘theoretically any man could plan and organize a war party if he got enough support, but in most cases this task was assumed by the experienced war chiefs’ (war leader seems more adequate a term). Neither among the Iroquois nor among the Huron was there any question of professional soldiers, or a military organization, an affair of the Nation, or any military action legitimized by the Nation as a whole. The many conflicts, raids, attacks, and violence found with the Iroquois and the Huron thus cannot be called ‘war’ in the sense of the definition developed by Cohen.

The application of the concept ‘State of Warre’ allows a reconciliation of the view that chiefs were war leaders par excellence, fighting as often as possible, with the opposite view that chiefdoms were actually quite peaceful, and that the many walls, ditches and palisades were mainly intended as defensive works. As in these societies no regulating force existed to curb eventual fights, and keep aggressive persons in check, they took care to make their site as strong as possible. This system worked reasonably well, as such forts were practically impregnable (Earle 1997 on the Mantaro; van Bakel 1989 on Rapa; cf. Sahlins 1968: 4–7). Such defenses did not prevent the occurrence of fights, raids and battles, but at least kept their inhabitants relatively safe. Moreover, war (or whatever term used) seems not a necessary condition for the development of more complex social systems as appears from Gunawardana’s publications on the development of chiefdoms and states on Sri Lanka

(Gunawardana 1981, 1985). The same holds for the African development, described above, which was termed levitation by Kopytoff. People went freely to a chief because of his assumed ability to dispense fertility (cf. Service 1975: 147). The qualification that chiefdoms permanently fought wars thus needs a lot of relativization.

THE CHIEFDOM

In this essay the term 'chiefdom' has rarely been used; the emphasis was rather on the concept of 'chief'. These terms, though certainly related, have a different background. The term 'chief' is indicative for a rather unspecified social status, while 'chiefdom' is connected with a specific type of political structure. It therefore seems possible – nay, even inevitable – to disconnect the two terms (Claessen and van de Velde 1992: 123). A chief is the leader of people with an ascribed status, as was argued in the foregoing; he holds an office. He (or she) can be found on several levels of political organization: village heads but also the leaders of complex political structures can qualify as 'chiefs'. It is even difficult to distinguish chief and king (as was noted above). The chiefdom, however, is part of a system of political structures, based on the tiers of administration. The simplest system consists of local communities only, characterized by one administrative level, *e.g.*, the village headman. The next system of organization is characterized by two levels of administration, and is called chiefdom. Here a number of local communities are united under one leader, the chief. The Early State forms the third system, with at least three tiers (Claessen and Skalnik 1978: 579). The chiefdom thus can be defined in structural terms as a political organization with two administrative tiers. The lower tier is formed by the local leaders who are connected immediately with the people. The second tier is formed by the central, or supra local leaders who rule via the local leaders (Claessen and van de Velde 1992: 123). Many cases are known of two tier political organizations, called chiefdoms. Hagesteijn (1989) describes in detail the Southeast Asian *muang* which consists of a central village where the chief resides, and a number of connected villages, subordinated to the center (*Ibid.*: 14). The two tier structure of Mississippian Moundville has been already mentioned above. Castels (1975: 68–69) reports on the two level political structure of the (pre-colonial) Batak of Sumatra (Indonesia). Here are found a number of villages, each dominated by a certain

lineage, and a number of higher order regions, in each of which a centrally placed lineage dominates the smaller ones.

It does not seem far-fetched to assume that chiefs are ruling chiefdoms. However, the ethnographical reality teaches differently. Among the Northwest Coast Indians of the USA there are found a number of local communities of which Philip Drucker states that 'The basic and only political unit in native Northwest Coast culture was the local group' (Drucker 1983: 87). In each of these local communities were found a number of chiefs (*Ibid.*: 88). These chiefs were hereditary socio-political leaders, and thus fall under the definition developed above. Between the chiefs in a village, but also between the villages, strong feelings of competition existed (de Laguna 1983: 77).⁷ Clearly these multi-chief local groups cannot be classified as chiefdoms. The connection chief – chiefdom thus does not always hold. On the other hand, there are also found two-tier political organization (thus, chiefdoms), ruled by leaders who rather qualify as big man. Examples of such leaders are described by Vansina (1991: 96–105; cf. Claessen 2000a: 141–142) for the Congo region in Central Africa. The village leaders as well as the 'district' leaders are a kind of big men, who build their position themselves; they were achieved leaders who tried to bind as many young men to their villages as possible. The whole structure was based on a fiction of bilateral family ties. The leader of a group of 'families' called 'Houses' was the 'father', the heads of the families were his 'sons'. The village was a collection of 'Houses' under the leadership of the big man of the most prominent 'House'. A number of villages coalesced to form a 'district' under the leadership of the 'eldest brother', the strongest of the village heads (Vansina 1991: 137–139) and so a two-tier structure was formed.⁸

So from now on we should reserve the term 'chief' for hereditary socio-political leaders, and use the term 'chiefdom' for two-tier political organizations only. This means a disconnection of chief and chiefdom.

SUMMARY

At the end of this overview the assumptions on chiefs and chiefdoms outlined in the Introduction can be evaluated. There is no doubt that chiefs occupy hereditary positions. Chiefs are also found to have sacred qualities, especially in the realm of fertility. These qualities are a solid legitimation for his position, and moreover, entitle him to goods and women from the people. These services he

rewards by handing out the Good: justice, protection, and fertility. The greatest part of his income is spent in the maintenance of good relations with the elite and the maintenance of his political organization. Often he uses prestige goods to bind the elite, but this system compels him to long distance trade. To keep his followers requires a lot of inventiveness on the side of the chief.

In most chiefdoms are found 'great works' ordered, organized and financed by the chief. The widely spread view that chiefdoms (two-tiered organizations) are permanently involved in war seems doubtful. There certainly is found a permanent 'State of Warre', but this does not necessarily imply that there is a permanent fighting.

Finally, it is argued here that the concepts of chief and chiefdom should be disconnected. There are found many chiefs administering single-tier societies, and there are also found big men ruling two-tier organizations.

NOTES

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¹ 'Political offices constitute an abstract structure of positions that are vested with political power and authority and provide incumbents (of the offices) access to other sources of power. A political office is established when leaders can transfer authority and power without objections from the political community to heirs, most commonly eldest sons (primogeniture)' (Kurtz 2001: 54).

² Illustrative is the great difference in actual power between the chief Clovis, the founder of the Merovingian dynasties, and the limited power of his royal successors in later years (Claessen 1985; Wood 1994). Moreover, most of the features ascribed to chiefs are also ascribed to the rulers of Early States (Claessen and Skalnik 1978).

³ For more works on African chiefship see Goody 1966; McIntosh 1999; Geary 1976; Schapera 1956; Holleman 1969.

⁴ On ramage see Claessen and van Bakel 2006: 222, note 3. Kirch and Green prefer the term 'House' (2001: 201). See also Sahlins 1963.

⁵ For the Marquesas Islands see Kirch 1991; van Bakel 1989. On Easter Island see McCoy 1979; McCall 1994; van Tilburg 1994. The term 'war' is too heavy a name for the fights and raids that actually took place.

⁶ The concept of 'strategic marriages' was developed by Elizabeth Bott in 1981 to explain the spread of Tongan influences over the wide surroundings.

⁷ The socio-political situation among the Northwest Coast tribes was rather complex. According to Suttles, the editor of the *Northwest Coast* volume of the *Handbook of North American Indians* (1990: 4) 'the population in the (winter) villages usually consisted of a wealthy elite (the chiefs or nobles), their followers and their slaves'. Blackman (1990: 249) states that among the Haida several line-

ages, each with its own hereditary chief, lived in the same village. Regarding the Tlingit, de Laguna states that every clan in a village had a clan chief. 'There is no village or tribal chief, although the head of the most prestigious clan in the community may appear to have such a position' (de Laguna 1983: 75). The idea of Ruyle (1973) that the Northwest Coast Indians had states seems wholly unfounded (cf. Claessen and Skalnik 1978).

⁸ On big man see van Bakel, Hagesteijn, and van de Velde 1986.

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