7
Chiefdoms: From Archaic Polities to Modern Terrorist Organizations*

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Abstract

The chiefdom concept is one of the most productive in social anthropology and political evolution. It helps to deeply understand the process of complication of society's structure and the development path from stateless society to early states. However, even when states spread everywhere, chiefdoms still remained political and administrative actors. At present one can find some features of chiefdoms in developing countries (e.g., in some regions of Africa) and in different kinds of organizations especially in illegal and terrorist ones. Thus, using chiefdom theories one can clarify a few basics of such kind of organization as well. Therefore, it makes sense to show how such chiefdom-like structures preserve and develop the features of ancient polities within them.

Thus, in the modern world, along with states, one can find numerous alternative social and political organizations, which, to a greater or lesser extent, have some features that are similar to certain ancient polities. How and why is this possible? We hope that this paper will shed some light on this question. However, it requires and deserves further study.

Keywords: *chiefdom, polity, pre-state polities, chieftaincies, complex polities, stateless societies, A1-Qaeda, ISIL, societal complexity.*

Archaic Politics

Politics as a realm of relations concerning the distribution of power (Smelser 1988) seems to have appeared around the age of the Upper Paleolithic Revolution. Actually, certain elements of 'quasi-political' relationships were already found among non-human primates – for example, see Dol'nik (2007) on complex and dynamic hierarchical relationships among the baboons (see also Butovskaya, Korotayev, and Kazankov 2000). Among nomadic hunter-gatherers, power systems remained minimally differentiated and weakly integrated; the level of their differentiation and integration more or less correlated with their demographic indicators. Power was mostly based on age and gender strati-

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fication, as well as on the leader's personal qualities, authority, and ability to secure for his community a more or less acceptable life. This was also frequently observed among early agriculturalists, especially among semi-nomadic ones (see, *e.g.*, Levi-Strauss 1955).

However, even among ethnographically described nomadic hunter-gatherers, important differences in the complexity of their sociopolitical organization were observed. While the majority of ethnographically described non-specialized nomadic hunter-gatherers were acephalous and egalitarian, some of them – for example, most Australian aboriginal communities – were non-egalitarian (*e.g.*, Artemova 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993; Artemova and Korotayev 2003; Chudinova 1981; Woodburn 1980, 1982). They demonstrated a sufficiently different type of sociopolitical organization and a much more structured political leadership concentrated in the hands of hierarchically organized elder males, with a pronounced inequality between males and females, as well as between older and younger males.

Among specialized ('higher') hunter-gatherers and fishermen of Siberia, the Far East, Kamchatka, Alaska, the Aleut Isles, and the American Northwest and Southwest, one could find rather highly structured forms of hierarchical sociopolitical organization that were sometimes even more pronounced than among many early agriculturalists (see, *e.g.*, Averkieva 1978; Shnirel'man 1986, 1989, 1993; Townsend 1985). However, such an evolution was to a certain extent a dead end since it could only have occurred in especially favorable environments and was unable to diffuse to cultures existing in other environments.

The Agrarian Revolution (or, to be more precise, its first phase connnected with the transition to primitive agriculture and animal husbandry; see Grinin 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Grinin and Korotayev 2009) initiated a period of profound sociodemographic changes. It is important to note that the increase in population and population density (as well as settlement or community sizes) tended to lead to an increase in the significance of political (*i.e.*, power) relations – including military interaction – both within and between societies. Thus even at this macro-evolutionary level it appears possible to speak about protopolitogenesis.

However, in order that such societies (exemplified in the ethnographic record by most traditional sociopolitical systems of New Guinea) could evolve toward more complex organizational forms, they had to develop an institution of chief or its (sometimes democratic) analogues. Hence the formation of the first polities reaching the level of complexity of chiefdoms and their analogues was one of the most important macro-evolutionary shifts.

The forms of sociopolitical organization at this level of complexity could be rather diverse: more or less centralized chiefdoms; self-governed civil or civil-temple communities; decentralized, chiefless complex tribes; and various

other acephalous, medium-complexity sociopolitical systems (see, *e.g.*, Berezkin 1995, 1997). We tend to speak about politogenesis proper starting from this level of political complexity.

The Notion of Chiefdom

The processes of growing societal complexity, emergence of new forms of social and political inequality, and formation of pre-state or complex stateless polities are among the most intriguing subjects of anthropology and social philosophy. The chiefdom concept plays a special role within the theories that try to account for the transition from simple social systems to systems of greater complexity. Following its emergence in the 1950s, this notion became an important heuristic means to advance anthropology and archaeology (see more details below). It was also subjected to vigorous debates within which the participants denied both the methodological significance and the very notion of the chiefdom. As seen in the dispute over chiefdoms between Timothy Pauketat (2007, 2010) and Robert Carneiro (2010a, 2010b), these debates are becoming even more vigorous in connection with the rapid accumulation of information on ancient societies. There is also much discrepancy in the definition of chiefdom since some scholars consider it a standard phase of cultural evolution, a natural transition between the 'Big Man' society and the states of the ancient world.

First, we must ask if the very notion of the chiefdom has become outdated. Can the chiefdom be regarded as an evolutionary stage? Do archaeological data adequately correspond to it? Does it make sense to provide definitions to the chiefdom, and is not the value of all typologies rather limited? Has the introduction of this notion been beneficial to archaeology? Or has it only obscured the situation? (Compare the above-mentioned discussion; see also the discussion about the emergence of chiefdoms and states in connection with the theory of Robert Carneiro, with the participation of leading political anthropologists, in the September 2012 issue of *Social Evolution & History)*.

We believe the current discussion indicates that the notion of the chiefdom remains rather useful (Bondarenko, Grinin, and Korotayev 2011; Grinin 2003, 2004, 2009b, 2012; Grinin and Korotayev 2009, 2012a). Of course, the theory of the chiefdom is in need of further refinement and the rapid accumulation of knowledge on ancient societies demands a revision of some stereotypes and rejection of certain rigid theoretical constructions (see also Grinin and Korotayev 2012b; Korotayev and Grinin 2013).

Thus, there is a rather urgent need for further development and amendment of evolutionary theory as it concerns the chiefdom concept.

Although at first glance the problems associated with the analysis of chiefdoms and other alternative forms of political organization of the pre-state and

early state epochs may look purely academic, in fact they can be understood as rather practical.

A careful analysis allows us to see many similarities between those ancient epochs and the current era. The discerning eye will see that some of the characteristics of chiefdoms and early states can be detected in many modern states, not only in the least developed ones (for more details see Grinin 2009a, 2012; Hagesteijn 2008). And there are many such states and the problems that arise within those modern chiefdoms and chieftaincies are very complex and acute. Some features of chiefdoms and other archaic polities can be found in purely modern systems, especially within large-scale terrorist organizations. The role of the leader (chief) within them, unique combinations of formal and informal modes of management, specific forms of structuring in accordance with social distance from the chief, and so on – the analysis of such structures can be facilitated by using some achievements of political anthropology.

What we can at least aim for is to develop a language for understanding such political groups, in their varied and intricate complexities, that will cut across disciplines. What are the characteristic features of modern chieftaincies? This is a subject of intense debate. For ancient chiefdoms one could use population size criteria (see also Carneiro 2012a, 2012b; Grinin 2004, 2009b; Grinin and Korotayev 2009). However, in today's world – where almost all demographic proportions of antiquity and ancient environmental constraints have long been broken and changed – such criteria are not appropriate. Therefore it is necessary to proceed from organizational and institutional frameworks.

A chiefdom is a polity that is headed by a chief whose rights are recognized by the chiefdom members on certain grounds, originating either from his hereditary or personal qualities. There are chiefdoms where chiefly status is hereditarily based, but there are also ones where it is based on a chief's personal merits – allowing him to become the head of the chiefdom. Note that the state can also be monarchic or democratic. But the distinction is not absolute. In any case, the chief must possess adequate personal abilities or chiefdoms can disintegrate – but not necessarily monarchic states, which often avoid disintegration even with very weak monarchs.

However, unlike a gang, a chiefdom is a much more stable formation. This formation can reproduce itself and the death or disappearance of the chief tends not to lead to the disappearance of the chiefdom itself. Thus, there is a certain institutional framework that holds a chieftaincy together, even if this framework is entirely immoral or extremely cruel. This is expressed rather cynically in the famous saying that organized crime is immortal, and it makes some forms of organized crime similar to the state. However, unlike the state, for chiefdoms (and especially for modern chieftaincies) their connection with territory is much less important. We can say that a chiefdom is primarily its people. The members of the chiefdom are not serfs, although their rulers often have

a desire to bind them as tightly as possible; in archaic chiefdoms they were often united through the affiliation to a particular clan or ramage structure. In modern chieftaincies this is often achieved by criminal, religious, or political recruitment. The state usually claims its sovereignty over people living within a certain territory.

This is why we believe that such an organization as A1-Qaeda (banned in Russia) has some features of modern chieftaincies. It has some interest in territory, but primarily in terms of ease of deployment. At the same time, an organization like ISIL[1] seems to be closer in type to the early states, since it claims sovereignty over certain areas and requires the submission of those living within this area. Chiefdoms and chieftaincies, rather, claim authority over certain people (although of course the distinction here is not perfectly rigid, since organized crime networks and similar illegal structures often claim their power over certain territories).[2] However, the early states (even centralized ones), as shown in various studies, were very loose and heterogeneous polities (Grinin 2004; Trapar 1981). And often those chiefdoms that recognized the early states' suzerainty constituted integral parts of their structure.

So within the ISIL system one seems to be able to detect certain chieftaincies. But at the moment this can only be maintained very hypothetically, because little is known of the actual structure of ISIL. Note also that the early imperial-type states (or the ones with imperial claims, which is seen in ISIL) are very often characterized by mass brutality over the conquered population (often accompanied by demonstrative cruelty). Also, not enough is known about the structure of such a notorious terrorist organization as Boko Haram in Nigeria, but at first glance it seems to be combining in a rather peculiar way features of the chiefdom and the early state – the first observed more in the type of organization and its 'manpower', according to some sources between seven thousand and ten thousand men (Dorrie 2015); the second observed in its ideology and objectives.

In ancient times, for people living within chiefdoms, there was almost no choice; nor had they ability to imagine another possibility. What keeps modern people within chieftaincies' zones of influence? In traditional societies this was largely the power of tradition. In modern chieftaincies – in addition to tradition – a very significant role is played by the forces that are related to meeting basic human needs in material resources, or ideas of self-realization. And when the state is weak, corrupt, or indifferent, its people may well fall under the influence of other forces or into the zone of influence of various modern chieftaincies. In modern societies, even the most archaic ones, any real power vacu-

[1] A terrorist organization banned in Russia

[2] Besides, one of the biggest sources of ISIL's strength comes from its economic independence (Zelin 2014).

um is never really observed. If the state is not able to influence people, they are influenced by other forces (including modern chieftaincies).

Here we see another very significant difference between the state and modern chieftaincies. In the state one may find much more noticeable formal management practices and attitudes, whereas in chieftaincies they tend to be informal and personal – similar to those that existed between a prince and his entourage, a feudal lord and his vassals, or a senior and a junior. Informal relationships are often more attractive to people than formal, and this is another reason for the amazing vitality of modern chieftaincies.

Derlugian and Earle note that

> chieftaincies constructed of personal power networks emerge recurrently within states and their business corporations, political parties, mafias, insurgencies and artistic cliques. Modern states were built by incorporating chieftaincies as internal organs. Nevertheless, 'neopatrimonialism', 'political machines', 'oligarchy', caudillismo, and warlordism – the various names that designate different facets of chieftaincy – represent neither aberrant nor atavistic phenomena. They refer to an immensely adaptable strategy of manipulation in arenas where formal institutional controls prove impractical or undesirable (Derlugian and Earle 2010: 51).

A modern globalizing world increasingly takes to the broad arena of action various marginal – but very energetic and aggressive – structures and organizations seeking to oppose global civilization and the established order, in the form of terrorist acts, war without any rules, or drug trafficking. Sometimes they act under the banner of religious ideas, and sometimes they do not hide behind anything.

Thanks to modern means of communication, these archaic forces can now demonstrate their strength and ideas. Most often these forces emerge and find sufficiently broad support in regions where state structures are weak. The tribal zone of the Middle East (where many tribes should be identified as chiefdoms rather than true tribes) is the most prominent focus.[3]

However, in some regions of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere this may also be the case. Thus, there is a conflict between complex statehood, and certain archaic chieftaincies or early state structures and forces.

Globalization intensifies the interaction between modern and archaic relationships in the world. Misunderstanding or ignoring the nature of this conflict on the part of the United States and Western countries, accompanied by inter-

[3] The theme of the similarities and differences between the present-day quasi-chiefdom and quasi-tribal formations goes beyond the scope of this study, but it is extremely important to analyze such situations that we see today in Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere, where the power of the state is replaced by non-state political ties.

ference from other countries and the destruction of weakly cemented states (such as Libya), leads to an exacerbation of these contradictions – which in turn translates into endless terrorist acts, difficult ideological confrontations, and a return of part of the population to archaic forms of life as a specific form of protest. We believe that this issue is of utmost importance.

The present-day world, to some extent, is confronting the same systemic problems that faced pre-state societies: how to grow and integrate without losing their own identities. Note that in ancient and medieval times we could also observe a process, which can be described by the present-day term 'globalization', for the rapid transformation of autonomous territories into parts of vast empires can well be interpreted as manifestations of ancient and medieval globalization. Yes, today the world experiences huge, often steep and abrupt changes. Which of those changes are positive? Which are negative? Which changes should be supported? Which changes should be counteracted? These questions do not have simple answers, but an appeal to historical analogies always helps find them. With a better understanding of the processes of the past, one can better understand current events, and one can find more effective ways to mitigate negative processes and to use the force of awakened archaic societies for their own and other peoples' benefit.

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