

CIVILIZATION

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ORIGINS OF SOCIETY, GOVERNMENT AND CULTURE

Lecture notes for PART 2: POLITICS – From bands to states

The following four-fold typology of societies summarizes the broadest changes between different human societies throughout history. Take note that not all societies will fall cleanly into these four categories.

Some may be in transition (ie. from chiefdom to state), or may vary in complexity (ie. the Vatican and China are both states, though China, by sheer size, is more complex). None the less, the following typology summarizes how a society's institutions change over time and compares them at different levels of organization. Thus it is important to bear in mind that societies **grow** and **evolve** through the years. Factors such as (a) the rise of food production, (b) the increase in population size act, (c) competition and (d) diffusion act in many ways to make features of complex societies possible.

	BAND	TRIBE	CHIEFDOM	STATE
MEMBERSHIP				
Number of people	dozens	Hundreds	thousands	over 50,000
Settlement Pattern	nomadic	fixed: 1 village	fixed: 1 or more villages	fixed: many villages and cities
Basis of relationships	kin	kin-based clans	class and residence	class and residence
Ethnicities and Languages	1	1	1	1 or more
GOVERNMENT				
Decision making, leadership	"egalitarian"	"egalitarian" or big-man	centralized, hereditary	centralized
Bureaucracy	none	none	none, or 1 or 2 levels	many levels
Monopoly of force and information	no	no	yes	yes
Conflict resolution	informal	informal	centralized	laws, judges
Hierarchy of settlement	no	no	no → paramount village	capital
RELIGION				
Justifies kleptocracy	no	no	yes	yes → no
ECONOMY				
Food production	no	no → yes	yes → intensive	intensive
Division of labor	no	no	no → yes	yes
Exchanges	reciprocal	reciprocal	redistributive ("tribute")	redistributive ("taxes")
Control of land	band	clan	chief	various
SOCIETY				
Stratified	no	no	yes, by kin	yes, not by kin
Slavery	no	no	small-scale	large-scale
Luxury goods for elite	no	no	yes	Yes
Public architecture	no	no	no → yes	yes
Indigenous literacy	no	no	no	often

NOTE: A horizontal arrow (→) indicates that the attribute varies between less and more complex societies of that type.

BAND

Bands are the tiniest societies, consisting of typically 5 to 80 people, most or all of them close relatives by birth or by marriage. In effect, a band is an **extended family** or several related extended families. Today, bands still living autonomously are almost confined to the most remote parts of New Guinea and Amazonia, but within modern times there were many others that have only recently fallen under state control or been assimilated or exterminated. All these modern bands are or were **nomadic hunter-gatherers** rather than settled food producers. Probably all humans lived in bands until at least 40,000 years ago, and most still did as recently as 11,000 years ago.

Bands lack many institutions that we take for granted in our own society. They have no permanent single base of residence. The band's land is used jointly by the whole group, instead of being partitioned among sub-groups or individuals. There is no regular **economic specialization**, except by age or sex: all able-bodied individuals forage for food. There are no formal **institutions** such as laws, police, and treaties, to resolve conflicts within and between bands. Band organization is often described as "**egalitarian**": there is no formalized **social stratification** into upper and lower classes, no formalized or **hereditary** leadership, and no formalized monopolies of information and decision-making. However, the term "egalitarian" should not be taken to mean that all band members are equal in prestige and contribute equally to decisions. Rather, the term merely means that any band "leadership" is informal and acquired through qualities such as personality, strength, intelligence, and fighting skills.

Bands are also nomadic because they must move when they have exhausted the resources in a particular area. Band numbers are also kept low by diseases (especially malaria), by the lack of raw materials and food yields in some areas (such as swamps and deserts).

Our closest animal relatives, the gorillas and chimpanzees and bonobos of Africa, also live in bands. All humans presumably did so too, until improved technology for extracting food allowed some hunter-gatherers to settle in permanent dwellings in resource-rich areas. The band is the political, economic, and social organization that we inherited from our millions of years of evolutionary history. Our developments beyond it all took place within the last few tens of thousands of years.

TRIBE

The tribe differs from the band in being larger (typically comprising hundreds rather than dozens of people) and usually having fixed settlements. However, some tribes and even chiefdoms consist of herders who move seasonally. A tribe also differs in that it consists of more than one formally recognized kinship group, termed clans, which exchange marriage partners. Land belongs to a particular **clan**, not to the whole tribe. However, the number of people in a tribe is still low enough that everyone knows everyone else by name and relationships.

Thus, those kinship ties between people in a tribe make police, laws, and other conflict-resolving institutions of larger societies unnecessary, since any two villagers getting into an argument will share many kin, who apply pressure on them to keep it from becoming violent.

Despite all of these differences between bands and tribes, many similarities remain. Tribes still have an informal, "egalitarian" system of government. Information and decision-making are both communal. None the less, many villages do have someone known as the "**big-man**," the most influential man of the village. But that position is not a formal office to be filled and carries only

limited power. The big-man has no independent decision-making authority, knows no diplomatic secrets, and can do no more than attempt to sway communal decisions. Big-men achieve that status by their own attributes, the position is not inherited.

Tribes also share with bands an “egalitarian” social system, without ranked lineages or classes. Not only is status not inherited, no member of a traditional tribe or band can become disproportionately wealthy by his or her own efforts, because each individual has debts and obligations to many others. It is therefore impossible for an outsider to guess, from appearances, which of all the adult men in a village is the big-man: he lives in the same type of hut, wears the same clothes or ornaments, or is as naked, as everyone else.

Like bands, tribes lack a bureaucracy, police force, and taxes. Their economy is based on **reciprocal exchanges** between individuals or families, rather than on a redistribution of tribute paid to some central authority. Economic specialization is slight: full-time craft specialists are lacking, and every able-bodied adult (including the big-man) participates in growing, gathering, or hunting food. Since tribes lack economic specialists, they also lack slaves, because there are no specialized menial jobs for a slave to perform.

CHIEFDOM

With regards to population size, chiefdoms were considerably larger than tribes, ranging from several thousand to several tens of thousands of people. That size created serious potential for internal conflict because, for any person living in a chiefdom, the vast majority of other people in the chiefdom were neither closely related by blood or marriage nor known by name. With the rise of chiefdoms around 7,500 years ago, people had to learn, for the first time in history, how to encounter strangers regularly without attempting to kill them.

Part of the solution to that problem was for one person, **the chief**, to exercise a monopoly on the right to use force. In contrast to a tribe’s big-man, a chief held a recognized office, filled by hereditary right. Instead of the decentralized anarchy of a village meeting, the chief was a permanent centralized authority, made all significant decisions, and had a monopoly on critical information (such as what a neighboring chief was privately threatening, or what harvest the gods had supposedly promised).

Unlike big-men, chiefs could be recognized from afar by visible distinguishing features. A commoner encountering a chief was obliged to perform ritual marks of respect, such as prostrating oneself. The chief’s orders might be transmitted through one or two levels of bureaucracy, many of whom were themselves low-ranked chiefs. And these low-ranked chiefs would assume generalized roles as dictated by the chief: they extracted tribute *and* oversaw irrigation *and* organized labor forces for the chief. (This will be different from the bureaucrats in the state, where they have separate tax collectors, water district managers, and military commanders. More on this soon.)

And for the first time in history, a class of people was exposed to what we would call **luxury goods**. A chiefdom’s large population in a small area required plenty of food, and this was supplied mostly by hunter-gathering in a few especially rich areas. And once this food gathered by some people (who are now seen as commoners) generated a food surplus, that surplus would go to feed the chiefs, their families, bureaucrats, and crafts specialists. The luxury goods consisted of these specialized craft products or rare objects obtained by long-distance trade, and all these goods were reserved for the chiefs. That concentration of luxury goods often makes it possible to recognize chiefdoms archaeologically, by the fact that some graves (those of chiefs) contain much richer

goods than other graves (those of commoners). Some ancient complex chiefdoms can also be distinguished from tribal villages by the remains of elaborate public architecture (such as temples).

Like tribes, chiefdoms consisted of multiple hereditary lineages living at one site. But unlike in tribal villages where there were equal-ranked clans, in a chiefdom all members of the chief's lineage had hereditary prerequisites. In effect, the society was divided into hereditary chief and commoner classes, and they concentrated marriages within their own lineage. Furthermore, since chiefs required menial servants as well as specialized craftspeople, chiefdoms differed in tribes in having many jobs that could be filled by slaves, typically obtained by capture in raids.

The most distinctive economic feature of chiefdoms was their shift from reliance solely on the reciprocal exchanges characteristic of bands and tribes, by which A gives B a gift while expecting B will eventually give a gift comparable of value to A. (We modern state dwellers engage in this behavior during birthdays and holidays.) While continuing reciprocal exchanges and without marketing or money, chiefdoms developed an additional new system termed a **redistributive economy**.

A simple example of a redistributive economy would involve a chief receiving wheat at harvest time from every farmer in the chiefdom, then throwing a feast for everybody and serving bread or else storing the wheat and gradually giving it out again in the months between harvests. When a large portion of the goods received from the commoners was not redistributed to them but was retained and consumed by the chiefly lineages and craftspeople, the redistribution becomes a **tribute**, an early form of taxation that made its first appearance in chiefdoms. From the commoners the chiefs claimed not only goods but also labor for construction of public works, which again might return to benefit the commoners (for example, irrigation systems to help feed everybody) or instead benefited mainly the chiefs (for instance, lavish tombs).

STATE

The political, economic, and social institutions most familiar to us today are those of states, which now rule all of the world's land area except for Antarctica. Many early states and all modern ones have had literate elites, and many modern states have literate masses as well. Vanished states tended to leave visible archaeological landmarks, such as ruins of temples with standardized designs, at least four levels of settlement sizes, and pottery styles covering thousands of miles. We thereby know that states rose around 3700 BC in Mesopotamia, and over 2,000 years ago in China and Southeast Asia.

Early states had a hereditary leader with a title equivalent to king (such as the title of "emperor"), like a super paramount chief and exercising an even greater monopoly of decision making, and power. Even in democracies today, crucial knowledge is available only to a few individuals, who control the flow of information to the rest of government and consequently control decisions.

Central control is more far-reaching, and economic redistribution in the form of tribute (renamed **taxes**) more extensive, in states than in chiefdoms. Economic specialization is more extreme, to the point where today farmers remain self-sufficient. Even the earliest Mesopotamian states exercised centralized control of their economies. Their food was produced by four specialist groups (cereal farmers, herders, fisherman, and orchard and garden growers), from each of which the state took the produce and to each of which it gave out the necessary supplies, tools, and foods other than the type of food that this group produced. The state supplied seeds and plow animals to

the cereal farmers, took wool from the herders, exchanged the wool by long-distance trade for metal and other essential raw materials, and paid out food rations to the laborers who maintained the irrigation systems on which the farmers depended.

Many, perhaps most, early states adopted slavery on a much larger scale than did chiefdoms. That was not because chiefdoms were more kindly disposed toward defeated enemies but because the greater economic specialization of states, with more mass production and more public works, provided more uses for slave labor. In addition, the larger scale of state warfare made more captives available.

A chiefdom's one or two levels of administration are greatly multiplied in states, as anyone who has seen an organization chart of any government knows. Internal conflict resolution within states has become increasingly formalized by laws, a judiciary, and police. The laws are often written because many states have had literate elites, writing having been developed around the same time as the formation of the earliest states in Mesopotamia. Of course, one example of such law is the Code of Hammurabi, a collection of rulings by the Babylonian king on matters of social conflict and disputes.

Early states had state religions and standardized temples. Many early kings were considered divine and were accorded special treatment in innumerable respects. For example, the emperors of China were perceived to carry the Mandate of Heaven, an edict believed to come from their ancestors, giving an emperor the power and authority to rule over the empire. Also, the Japanese language includes special forms of the pronoun "you" for use only in addressing the emperor. Early kings were themselves the head of the state religion or else had separate high priests. The Mesopotamian temple was the center not only of religion but also of economic redistribution, writing and crafts technology.

All these features of states carry to an extreme the developments that led from tribes to chiefdoms. In addition, though, states have diverged from chiefdoms in several new directions. The most fundamental such distinction is that states are organized on political and territorial lines, not on the kinship lines that defined bands, tribes and simple chiefdoms. Furthermore, bands and tribes always, and chiefdoms usually, consist of a single ethnic and linguistic group. States, though – especially so-called empires formed by amalgamation or conquest of states – are regularly multiethnic and multilingual. State bureaucrats are not selected mainly on the basis of kinship, as in chiefdoms, but are professionals selected at least partly on the basis of training and ability. In later states, including most today, the leadership often became nonhereditary, and many states abandoned the entire system of formal hereditary classes carried over from chiefdoms.