CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

**POLITICAL ORGANIZATION**

# Need for Political Organization

All societies have political systems that function to manage public affairs, maintain social order, and resolve conflict. Yet the forms of these political systems are diverse, sometimes embedded in other social structures.

**Studying Political Organization**

Political organization involves issues like allocation of political roles, levels of political integration, concentrations of power and authority, mechanisms of social control and resolving conflicts.

Anthropologists recognize four types of political organization based on levels of political integration, concentration, specialization. Political organization is found within bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states. Nowadays, non-state forms of political organization have state systems superimposed on them.

**Types of Political Systems**

Societies based on bands have the least amount of political integration and role specialization (Kung in Kalahari).

**Bands**

Bands are most often found in foraging societies and are associated with low population densities, distribution systems based on reciprocity, and egalitarian social relations.

**Tribal Organizations**

Tribal organizations are most commonly found among horticulturists and pastoralists (Neur in Sudan).

With larger and more sedentary populations than are found in band societies, tribal organizations do also lack centralized political leadership and are egalitarian. Tribally based societies have certain pan-tribal mechanisms that integrate clan members to face external threats.

Clan elders do not hold formal political offices but usually manage affairs of their clans (settling disputes, representing clan in negotiation with other clans etc.).

**Chiefdoms**

Chiefdoms involve a more formal and permanent political structure than is found in tribal societies. Political authority in chiefdoms rests with individuals, who acts alone or with advice of a council. Most chiefdom tends to have quite distinct social ranks, rely on feasting and tribute as a major way of distributing goods.

In the late nineteenth and twentieth century, many societies had chiefdoms imposed on them by colonial powers for administrative convenience (for e.g. British impositions in Nigeria, Kenya and Australia). The pre-colonial Hawaiian political system of the 18th century was a typical chiefdom.

**Useful Terms**

**Public Affairs***:*issues concerning the public at large instead of specific individuals only

**Social Order***:*the state of being where society functions as per the expectations of people and can providethem with a sense of security

**Sedentary***:*settled

**Colonial powers***:*at different phases of history, different nations have been powerful enough to colonizeother nations. In the 19th century Britain was a colonial power which was able to colonize many other countries located on the African and the Asian continents

**Pre-colonial***:*the period in history when a particular nation had not yet been colonized

**Allocation***:*distribution

**Integration***:*tied together or linked in a particular manner

**Suggested Readings**

Students are advised to read the following chapters to develop a better understanding of the various principals highlighted in this hand-out:

Chapter 12 in ‘*Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective’ by Ferrarro and/or Chapter 23 in ‘Anthropology’ by* *Ember and Pergrin*

**State Systems**

State systems have the greatest amount of political integration, specialized political roles and maintain authority on the basis of an ideology. States are associated with intensive agriculture market economies, urbanization, and complex forms of social stratification.

States began to be formed 5,500 years ago with the Greek city-states and the Roman Empire providing impressive examples of state based political organization.

States have a monopoly on the use of force and can make and enforce laws, collect taxes, and recruit labor for military service and public works, which differentiates them from other forms of political organization. States are now the most prominent form of political organization found around the world today.

**Nation-States**

A nation is a group pf people sharing a common symbolic identity, culture history and religion. A state is a distinct political structure like bands, tribes and chiefdoms.

Nation-state refers to a group of people sharing a common cultural background and unified by a political structure that they consider to be legitimate. Few of the world’s 200 nation-states have homogenous populations to fit the description of a nation state.

**Political Organization Theories**

Theories explaining the rise of state systems of government have centered on the question of why people surrender some of their autonomy to the power and authority of the state.

There are theorists who argue that political organization is influenced by self interest and other theorists argue that self-interest is not enough to give shape to political systems and that such organization often involves a certain amount of coercion.

**Voluntaristic State Formation**

Some theorists suggest that those engaging in specialized labor voluntarily gave up their autonomy in exchange for perceived benefits.

Political integration can mediate between and protect interests of varied groups and provide them an economic superstructure required for specialization (Chide, 1936).

**Hydraulic Theory of State Formation**

Small-scale farmers in arid or semi-arid areas also voluntarily merged into larger political entities due to the economic advantage of large-scale irrigation (Karl Wittfogel, 1957)

**Coercive Theory of State Formation**

Another explanation for state based political organization is that offered by Carneiro, hold that states developed as a result of warfare and coercion rather than due to voluntary self-interest.

**Useful Terms**

**Coercion***:*use of force

**Arid***:*dry

**Small-scale farmers***:*farmers possessing a little amount of land

**Irrigation***:*the channeling of water from its natural route for the purposes of agriculture

**Monopoly***:*dominating the production of a particular product

**Hydrauli***c:*water-based

**Homogenous***:*identical to others, opposite of heterogeneous

**Recruit***:*to include or to involve

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**Need for Social Control**

All forms of political organization must provide means for social control. Every culture has defined what are considered to be normal, proper or expected ways of behaving in society. These expected ways of behaving are referred to as social norms.

Social norms range from etiquette to laws and imply different forms of enforcement and sanctions. Breaking some social norms does not result in serious consequences whereas others can result in severe punishment. Consider for example the consequence of taking another person’s life or of stealing something.

**Social Norms**

All social norms are sanctioned to varying degrees according to the values held by different cultures.

Positive social norms reward people for behaving in socially expectable ways (ranging from praise or social approval to awards or medals). Negative social norms punish people for violating the norms (ranging from disapproval to corporal punishment).

**Maintaining Social Control**

Band and tribal societies (Inuit and Kung) maintain social control by means of informal mechanisms such as socialization, public opinion, lineage obligations, age organizations and sanctions.

Societies control behavior by more formal mechanisms, such as through laws and law enforcement agencies, whose major function is maintaining social order and resolving conflicts.

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**Informal Mechanisms**

Socialization ensures that people are taught what their social norms are. Public opinion or social pressure often serves as an effective mechanism to avoid censure and rejection. Age organization provides distinct age categories with defined sets of social roles.

**Formal Mechanisms**

**Song Duets:** amongst the Inuits to settle disputes

**Social Intermediaries:** like the Leopard-skin Chief of the Neur in southern Sudan settles murder disputesby property settlements

**Moots:** are formal airings of disputes involving kinsmen and friends of litigants and the adjudicating bodiesare ad hoc

**Courts and Codified Laws:** forbid individual use of force and provides legal frameworks established bylegislative bodies, interpreted by judicial bodies and implemented by administrative systems like law enforcement agencies

**Useful Terms**

**Administrative systems***:*the system of government officials/bureaucrats who are responsible for runningpublic affairs

**Judicial systems***:*the system of courts which interprets the laws

**Legislative systems:** systems which provide the laws for a particular society, often legislatures or legislativeassemblies are elected by the people of a particular locality, i.e. province or a state

**Law enforcement agencies***:*agencies which enforce the law, like the police fro example

**Litigants:** aggrieved parties involved in a legal dispute

**Ad Hoc***:*arbitrary, not following any established procedure