

Selected Tribal Succession To Power

This paper will focus on the comparison and contrasting values of the structural principles governing succession to political offices in several distinct societies. These societies include the Eskimo, the Kung, the Ibo, the Nuer, the Cheyenne, and the Bunyoro. These groups are from a wide range of locations, from the Arctic to Eastern Africa, and span the spectrum of political evolution. One coherent way to compare the structural principles that govern succession in different types of political entities is to begin with the simplest group, and progress through the evolution of the state to the most complex forms.

In the article “The Eskimo,” by E. Adamson Hoebel, there is clearly a very simple social structure in what can, at best, be described as a band. There are no chiefdomships of organized bands and no hierarchy of offices with power. In order to reduce the risks and uncertainties associated with governance, only two positions exist in these Eskimos’ life that can be considered political office, and even these are not solid. Rarely, there is a “headman,” but the definition of this position is “if people are listening to you, you are a headman, and when they don’t, you are not one” (class notes: 9/19). The structural principle at work here is public opinion. Just as the Eskimo use public opinion to help maintain the peace, by ostracism, so does the public regulate leadership, by cooperation. There is however the occasional “shaman” who has not his own coercive power, but spiritual authority. This authority is very limited and it could be argued that this position is not even a political office. As the shaman typically has in mind public aims of the people, some force, and a strategy, he can still be considered a political entity. Coinciding

with the lack of public ritual to mark status in Eskimo life, other political offices do not exist.

Of the societies being discussed in this paper, the Eskimo most closely resemble the Kung in the respects of political offices. The Kung do not have government, but do have politics and a more frequent and definable occurrence of the headman. For the Kung, the headman is a link for families. The principle of family and family ties is thus important to the Kung, though not as important to the Kung as the Bunyoro kingship, but still more important than family in Eskimo society. To be in a band, family ties to the headman are required. Family is such an important structural principle for the Kung because the position of headman of a band is inherited through the father, but it is unsure to whom exactly (class notes: 9/19). If, no close family tie takes the role, then a person with a forceful personality can take the position. This type requirement is similar to the “personal requirements for a tribal chief” (Hoebel 1988: 43) of the Cheyenne. Also, a Kung headman requires a group of elders to make group decisions, similar to the consultations that a Nuer group makes to their elders when seeking some decisions (Evans-Pritchard 1969: 172) but not nearly as solid a dependence as on the Council of 44 or chiefs in Cheyenne life (Hoebel 1988: 52). The Kung have no more known positions that can be said to be political offices.

Along the lines of the Kung and Eskimo, the Nuer have few political offices as they too are a stateless society with politics (Evans-Pritchard 1969: 4-5). In contrast to the Bunyoro, in Nuer life there is no state, no law and no king (Evans-Pritchard 1969: 178-179). Also, in contrast to the Cheyenne, in Nuer life there is no “father of the clan” and no “council of clan elders” (Evans-Pritchard 1969: 179). The Nuer’s seasonal

migration really changes the make up of each group, and thus has the potential to change the leadership. Key to Nuer life, and thus political life is the principle of the feud. Fear of a feud helps to keep the peace since vengeance is so prevalent. None of the other societies covered in this paper have as close a relationship with the feud. Helping to prevent feuds is basically the only position in Nuer life that is a solidly political, the Leopard Skin Chief. Regardless of the chiefs' minimal authority (like that of Kung and Eskimo leaders), since typical Nuer life lacks the coercive force required to successfully lead, the position is still a political office. More informally, ritual status can give a man "vague influence in his locality" but this does not mount up to political position or office as that man will only have authority in specific ritual situations (Evans-Pritchard 1969: 178). By contrast, rituals and ritual status are used as justification for the role and validity of the Bunyoro kings. Local influence for the Nuer however, is better established by age and sex, and in all societies discussed here, but for the Eskimo, it is clear that age and sex help to govern succession to various political positions. These structural principles (age and sex) may best be demonstrated in the existence of the Okwiri, Kalyota, and Mukama of the Bunyoro. The "official brother," "official sister," is specifically and obviously dependent on sex, while the kingship is dependant on both age and sex (Beattie 1960: 27-29). The kingship, with mythical support, rarely, if ever, goes to the oldest son of the former king. Also, the age grades of the Ibo clearly demonstrate political succession, as the junior age grade is just a training level and the structural apex or middle age grade is very active making the bulk of laws and settling disputes (class notes: 10/15). For the Nuer, age and sex are obvious qualifications to succeed from status of a man into the status of elder.

Finally, for the Nuer the structural principle of property and ownership exists. Since the Nuer do not have any real political office, excluding the weak Leopard Skin chiefs, influence takes the role of politics. If a man in the Nuer “possess[es] sufficient cows to entertain his guests and attract young kinship” then he can become the informal “master of the hamlet” (Evans-Pritchard 1969: 180). Property is a significant structural principle in many societies for political advancement, like the Bunyoro king is rooted in the amount of land he owns for that is where he draws much of his power, but for the Kung it is the lack of property, and continual sharing (like arrow ownership) that helps just to keep the peace. Even in the Cheyenne, the ability to take enemy horses can increase social prestige or family status, which may help lead to selection as a chief (Hoebel 1988: 29).

In *The Cheyennes, Indians of the Great Plains*, again by Hoebel, the principle of personality has much to do with succession to political office. In order to be one of the Council of 44 or a tribal chief one must meet a lengthy list of personal traits including; “even-tempered good nature, energy, wisdom, kindness,” etc and must constantly give to the poor (Hoebel 1988: 43). Since outgoing chiefs choose their own successors, from their own band, meeting the “standards” of a chief may or may not be supremely important, depending on the individual, as it is one person’s decision and a chief may not be removed until the end of his term (Hoebel 1988: 51). The necessity of desirable or socially described “good” traits can also be reflected in the leaders of the Kung, and the few leaders of the Eskimo. In those types of societies, bands, when the people do not have to listen since there is a clear lack of coercive power, a leader must be appealing to those, which he intends to lead. Whereas, in Bunyoro life, where the sons of the Mukama

uses force to achieve political succession, here, only a minimal level of appeal must be retained, as to not get overthrown. For the Cheyenne, myth and ritual is also important to attaining political office. Leaders must be able to carry out the Arrow Renewal, Sacred Hat, Animal Dance and Sun Dance rituals (Hoebel 1988: 14-28). This helps explain what Hoebel calls the “dependence of the Cheyenne on the supernatural world” (1988: 50).

Family and kindred are some of the most significant groups of the Cheyenne, as is the case with the Kung, Nuer and Bunyoro. Since families differ in social prestige, ability for succession to chief-ships may be more difficult for “poor” families. Though Hoebel does not suggest that a chief may be more or less inclined to choose a direct family member (like a son) there must have been cases of nepotism. The importance of family relations has already been demonstrated in the relations of the Bunyoro, but can also be seen in the patriarchal camps of the Ibo and especially the Nuer. Another way family ties can be demonstrated is by inheritance. Since, with the Ibo leaderships is directly traced through women and most land is owned by the matrilineal clan, tracing membership to women (often through the wife) is crucial to any politically based or aimed succession.

Structural principles governing succession to political office in a state environment can be seen in the society of the Bunyoro. If two words could accurately sum up a society, for the Bunyoro it would be superordination and subordination. Succession to political office in this society can be directly linked to the relationship an “ego” has with the king, or Mukama (Beattie 1960: 25). The Bunyoro are unlike any other society discussed in this paper, as they are the only state. With a hereditary ruler, in this society there is expected to be particularism. Particularism could gain a person a role

as a chief, or sub chief. But, the power of the king lies is the justification by myth, as has already been discussed (Beattie 1960: 25). This relationship, of superordination and subordination, cannot be stressed enough for succession to political office. The Mukama, if he is strong, may take away political status from a person if he falls out of his favor. This is not found in the other societies discussed in this paper. Subordination is important because each person is expected to respect those who rank above him or her, and it may be costly if they do not (class notes: 10/22).

As a whole the Eskimo, the Kung, the Ibo, the Nuer, the Cheyenne and the Bunyoro do not have many, if any, common, across the board structural principles that react the same way towards political succession. It seems that kinship, whether perceived or actual, is the closest thing to a universal among these groups, followed by age differentiation. Kinship relations is obviously very important to the bands and tribes for sustaining life, but it is also important in at the state level in the societies that this paper covers. At the state level, the individual is reliant upon family ties to obtain high political position and status. Though, this is not the only way, but it does help. Sex is not so much a common structural principle as the Kung, and to a degree the Eskimo do not make such distinctions. There are other structural principles that govern succession to political office, but it is difficult to make some comparisons because several of the focus societies do not have extensive political positions that can be studied. Weak or non-existent statuses, such as the Eskimo headman, are in some cases the only positions available for discussion. Also, for some of the other focus societies, like the Cheyenne, little is known about the process in which a person can attain a position, or even what group of persons have the ability to hold a position. Despite some problems, as mentioned, the goal of this

paper, to compare and contrast a select group of societies' structural principles that govern succession to political office, has been accomplished as materials and research best allowed.

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