

States, Chiefdoms, and Tribes

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In social and cultural anthropology, the term "chieftainship" refers to a form of government in which there are fixed political offices with designated authority over defined territories and the people living within their boundaries. The political offices of a chieftainship have minimal advisory and administrative powers, but there are always defined rules of succession for the principal official, the "chief." Often a chieftainship is headed by a paramount chief, who is regarded as politically superior to other chiefs. Some of these chieftainships are pyramidal in structure: the paramount chief has direct authority over lesser chiefs, who in turn have authority over petty chiefs, and so on down a hierarchy of power and influence. Other "segmentary" chieftainships are composed of an association of several nearly autonomous constituent chieftainships, which may or may not be similar to each other in their internal

organization. In some cases, each segment of these associations is regarded as equal to the others, while in other instances the constituent chieftainships are ranked as to authority, so that one is superior to all the others. In most chieftainships, especially those with several tiers of authority, there is sufficient organizational authority to marshal large groups for a variety of undertakings, such as public construction and warfare.

Anthropologists often contrast chieftainships with two other forms of political organization: the state and the tribe. In general, chieftainships are less politically centralized, less hierarchical, and less extensive in area than small states, but more centralized and more extensive than tribes. Tribes have no political offices. Leadership rests with influential individuals, who have won their positions by achievement; there are no rules of succession for such influential personages. Small states, on the other hand, support complex administrative organizations. Usually, but not always, they have more coercive and efficient means of mobilizing labor and collecting taxes for the government than do

chieftainships. Most small states are governed by hereditary rulers — royal families and dynasties.

Numerous examples of all three types of organization existed in pre-modern times. Tribal organization was characteristic of the Hopi and Zuni in North America. Small states include those of the Zapotec and Mixtec people in Mesoamerica, the Zulus in South Africa, and most of the "kingdoms" mentioned in the Old Testament. Chieftainships were common in sub-Saharan Africa and in the Polynesian islands of the Pacific Ocean. Hawaii is particularly interesting because of the changes in political organization that can be documented. When first contacted by European explorers, it was a chieftainship. Influences from Europe and the United States transformed these islands into an independent "kingdom" (in our terms, a small state), under the leadership of the warrior king Kamehameha. The indigenous political system of Hawaii came to an end in 1900, when it was annexed by the United States as a Territory, and later became a "state" within our federal system (see "Hawaiian Feudalism," *Expedition* 6[2]:14-27, [1964]).