II. SOCIAL EVOLUTION

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Chiefdoms: Beyond Time[*]

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of chiefdom, which is a very ancient form of political organization and its features can be found in various formal and informal organizations of modern times (including in societies where tribalism is strong, criminal networks, clandestine and terrorist organizations, etc.). A comparison has been made between chiefdoms of previous epochs and modern chiefdom-like structures. The authors show that there are many similarities between the ancient and present eras in this aspect.

Keywords: *chiefdom, state, chief, leader, political groups, personal power, terrorist organizations, mafia organizations.*

Introductory Remarks

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.[1] A careful analysis allows us to see many similarities between

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[1] On the difficulties of applying the concept of chieftaincy and complex chieftaincy see Claessen 2017; Earle 2017; Gibson 2011, 2012, 2017; Grinin and Korotayev 2012, 2013, 2017a, 2017b; Kradin 2017; Grinin 2012; about an apology of the concept of chiefdom see Carneiro 2010, 2017; about the discussion of the relevance of the concept see Carneiro 2010; Pauketat 2010.

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. 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.

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. And the periods of the formation of chiefdoms and states will undoubtedly provide a better understanding of some of today's processes. 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.

As we have repeatedly noted, (see *e.g.*, Grinin 2012; Grinin and Korotayev 2012a, 2012b, 2017b), the emergence of the concept of chiefdom (a special merit belongs to M. Sahlins and E. Service) provided a powerful impetus for political-anthropological research and some other numerous studies, which were able to identify certain trends in the seemingly chaotic proto-political formations of Barbarian societies. However, this concept, like others describing early forms of political organization, is able to explain much more than just the past. The fact is that the political structure of large regions and even of the world is never homogeneous and represented by only one class of political entities. So, the ancient empires (including the Roman or Byzantine ones), along with sufficiently advanced forms of governance in the centre, could have quite archaic forms of governance in the periphery, which combined the elements of pre-state formations, including chiefdoms. The modern states of Asia and Africa include many socio-political formations of different evolutionary types that retain (and in some cases manifest even in a hypertrophied form) the features of tribal formations, which is one of the reasons for the phenomenon of state failure. To understand these modern (but archaic) structures, the theories of chiefdoms, the early state or their analogues (as well as other political-anthropological theories) are indispensable. But in addition to formal and recognized (albeit with widely differing levels of sustainability and development) political structures, there are also informal structures in a number of countries, which

sometimes compete, and sometimes cooperate with the authorities. Another aspect due to which these theories could be helpful is the study of terrorist organizations, many of whose relationships resemble those in chiefdoms or other non-state and proto-state structures to varying degrees. Finally, the application of the theory of chiefdoms to elucidate the functioning and organization of criminal and mafia structures that exist in almost every country in the world is promising.

This is why one should not focus only on the academic aspects of the problem of pre-state and non-state polities and it makes sense to show how such chiefdom-like network and other power structures retain and develop the features of ancient polities. Thus, in the contemporary world there is a multitude of socio-political organizations that exist alongside, within the states, or disputing the power claims of states and to a greater or lesser degree have the features similar to the ancient primitive polities. How and why is this possible? In this article we hope to give some answers.

There are works that provide a broad panorama of the presence of the chiefdoms and chiefdom-like entities in different regions, not to mention organizations such as Al-Qaeda.[2] We can also improve the terminology for understanding such political groupings in their variability and great complexity and even in an interdisciplinary aspect.

What can be said about the characteristics of such contemporary chiefdom-like entities? Nowadays, the globalizing world increasingly takes to the broad arena of action various marginal, but very active and violent, 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. Thus, just as in ancient times the collapse of states led to the formation of structures similar to chiefdoms in one way or another, so today a weak state generates *similar* structures. The tribal zone of the Middle East (where many tribes should be identified as chiefdoms rather than true tribes) is the most prominent focus. However, in some other regions this may also be the case (see below).

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As already mentioned, in addition to their academic significance, the problems associated with the analysis of chiefdoms and other alternative forms of

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[2] The terrorist organization is banned in Russia.

political organization of pre-state and early state eras are also of considerable practical importance. In their work Patrick Chabal, Gary M. Feinman, and Petr Skalnik (Chabal *et al.* 2017) provide a very broad panorama of the presence of chiefdoms, *chieftaincies, and* chiefdom-like entities in different regions of the world. Since the article was written some time ago, there is no mention of organizations such as Al-Qaeda.[3] However, this gap is largely filled by Timothy Earle's article (2017).

As already mentioned, 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. 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 terri-

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[3] The terrorist organization is banned in Russia.

tory 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 think that such an organization as Al-Qaeda[4] 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[5] 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.[6] 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. 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[7] 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

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[4] The terrorist organization is banned in Russia.
[5] The terrorist organization is banned in Russia.
[6] Besides, one of the biggest sources of ISIL's strength comes from its economic independence (Zelin 2014).
[7] The terrorist organization is banned in Russia.

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 vacuum 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 (2010: 51).

In which areas are chiefdom-like entities more likely to emerge today? The tribal zone of the Middle East (where many tribes should be identified as chiefdoms rather than true tribes) is the most prominent focus.[8] However, in some regions of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere this may be also the case. Thus, there is a conflict between complex statehood and certain archaic chieftaincies or early state structures forces.

Therefore, 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 interference from other countries and the destruction of weakly cemented states (such as Iraq and Libya), leads to an exacerbation of these contradictions – which in turn translates into endless terrorist acts, difficult ideological confron-

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[8] On the similarities and differences between tribes and chiefdoms see Grinin and Korotayev 2012, 2017a; Korotayev 2000, 2003, 2004, 2006. 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 observe today in Lybia, Yemen and elsewhere where the power of the state is replaced by non-state political ties.

tations, 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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