

## KEEPER OF THE UMBILICAL CORD

Dr. MORRIS SIEGEL

*United States Anthropologist, Former Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, and one-time Economic Affairs Officer, Department of Economic Affairs, United Nations.*

THE rapidity with which political changes are taking place in Africa raises the fundamental question of native African political capabilities. In certain areas, particularly East, Central, and Southern Africa, strongly entrenched white elements still oppose the extension of additional political power to Africans on political and economic technical grounds. The political argument, which is the main concern here, asserts that Africans are simply too backward culturally and insufficiently experienced politically to shoulder the responsibilities of self-government, at least as conceived by Westerners. This assertion rests, in turn, on the assumption that the political institutions originally developed by Africans themselves failed to equip them adequately for the tasks of modern government.

Ample data are available on indigenous political systems. Nevertheless, these data have been largely ignored in judgments of native African political capabilities. One reason is that the evidence lies buried in technical monographs and reports painstakingly prepared by anthropologists and anthropologically-oriented colonial officials and missionaries.

A second obstacle arises from the methods specialists customarily use in describing native societies and their interlocking institutions. It is true, for example, that kinship relations and magico-religious practices play far more important roles in an African political system than in a Western society. These factors are not only significant in the ideology of the people, but they frequently provide the ultimate sanctions of authority. Their inclusion in a detailed, integrated description of the political life of a society, though scientifically proper and necessary, tends, however, to blot out the main outlines of the political system in force. The result is an over-emphasis on differences between African and Western political organisations, although the differences are actually just superficial.

Language factors, or terminologies, also present barriers to ready understanding of an indigenous political system by non-specialists. An individual in the Buganda kingdom, for example,

bears the quaint title, 'Keeper of the (King's) Umbilical Cord.' An analysis based on status and function shows that this person holds high rank and wields considerable power in the political organisation of the Baganda. It is often necessary to go beyond terminology to grasp fully the real facts of an African political system.

African political systems are comprehensible within the framework of recognized Western political concepts, since all governments, whether simply or elaborately organised, must perform certain essential functions—the maintenance of internal peace and order, the protection of persons and property, and the preservation of external security. In addition, African political systems are classifiable in the traditional manner—according to the degree of centralization or decentralization of authority. The criteria for classification involve, broadly, the distribution of power, more or less limited by some system of checks and balances and the right of veto and impeachment, as well as the structural aspects embodied in the administrative organisation and the principles and practices of law and justice.

While many African States consisted of only a few thousand people, in several instances millions of subjects were included under one government. In either case, however, the relatively complex political organisations were clearly defined. Moreover, a few of these States persisted for centuries, thus indicating the large degree of political stability that had been attained.

Space limitations forbid the description of more than a small sampling. The selection of the Baganda, the Ashanti, the Bantu-speaking tribes, and the Zulu under Chaka, has therefore been made with a view to showing varying political types that formerly existed in a large part of Africa.

**The Baganda:** The Baganda kingdom in Uganda, East Africa, attained its zenith in the second half of the nineteenth century under the rule of King Mutesa. Early in King Mutesa's reign the population was said to have been some three millions, but after his death a civil war and a severe famine reduced the inhabitants by half. Later, sleeping sickness further reduced the population, which in the first decade of the present century was estimated at something over a million.

The history of the Baganda, preserved in tradition and legends, describes over thirty generations of kings, beginning with the first king, Kuntu, who reigned about 1,000 years ago. Throughout this long history, Baganda rulers enjoyed despotic powers

and drew a sharp distinction between the royal family, whose blood was considered sacred, and the rest of the population—i.e., the commoners. Politically, the kingdom represents an outstanding African example of centralised power, in which ultimate authority over the lives and rights of its citizens (and slaves) rested in the monarch. Administration of the government, however, was the function of a large number of officials, ranked hierarchically, but with vertical mobility possible even to the lowest members.

A body of chiefs assisted the sovereign in governing the kingdom, which was divided for administrative purposes into ten large districts, each headed by a chief. Two additional chiefs, the prime minister and the king's favourite (called 'Keeper of the (King's) Umbilical Cord'), ranked higher than the district chiefs and, like the king, held tax-free estates in every district. Commoners addressed these two officials as 'kings' because they paid no tribute and sent their own agents along with the king's messengers when taxes and tribute were collected. They further enjoyed the exclusive right to visit the monarch at all times.

The prime minister stood foremost among the officials, serving also as chief justice. All State matters passed first through the prime minister's hands; even chiefs had to inform him in advance if they wished to visit the king. Since the Baganda would not tolerate a woman on the throne, the prime minister became regent if a prince was too young to govern the country. Although a king had the authority to depose his prime minister, it was only in extreme cases that he would exercise this power.

The ten district chiefs handled most routine administrative functions, rendering accounts periodically to the prime minister who, in turn, reported to the king and the full council. This council consisted of the prime minister, the favourite chief, and the incumbent district chiefs. Each chief controlled large tracts of land in his district, for which he was responsible to the king and council. The estates had to be kept in good order, or the chief would risk dismissal from office or a stiff fine.

District chiefs were required to maintain roads about four feet wide connecting their headquarters with the capital, where much of their time was spent. Whenever local affairs claimed their attention, these chiefs obtained the king's permission to return home; and, during their absences, authorised representatives

substituted for them in the council. In his district the chief was supreme; he was the principal magistrate and had a number of sub-chiefs as assistants.

Sub-chiefs were also obliged to maintain in good order roads leading from their residence to that of the district chief. Thus, it was possible to reach any part of the kingdom with relative ease. Sub-chiefs were independent of district chiefs in the management of their lands, and they exercised the right to conscript labour for work on roads, bridges, etc. In all matters that concerned the State, however, they had to consult their superiors.

The queen and the king's mother ranked above all chiefs, though below the king. They, too, wielded absolute power over their own subjects. Both controlled estates in each district which were administered by chiefs they appointed themselves, and they conducted courts in which cases involving their followers were adjudicated. The queen, who was absolutely prohibited from having children, was chosen for the position by the deceased king's official widow from among the new ruler's many wives. The king's mother was greatly respected and honoured throughout the land because of her close relationship to the king.

A full complement of courts operated in the Baganda kingdom. Cases were first tried in the courts of sub-chiefs, and if they ended in dispute they were referred to the higher district court. Appeals from the latter went to the court of the prime minister, where most cases ended, to be heard by him or delegated assistants. He personally judged important trials. Exceptionally, cases would go as far as the king's court, highest in the kingdom. Baganda custom prescribed that both plaintiffs and defendants should pay fixed fees to each court, thus making appeals a costly process. Established sentences obtained for all acts defined as crimes, such as theft, treason, adultery, homicide and murder. Prisons were lacking, but when offenders were ordered into confinement they were placed in the stocks, which consisted of heavy logs with holes large enough for the foot to enter.

Several tribes subjugated by King Mutesa held subsidiary places in the Baganda kingdom. The Busoga tribe to the north, which yielded large tribute in cattle, ivory, and slaves, was administered by one of the Baganda district chiefs, that of Kyagwe, while the Koki, formerly an independent kingdom,

and the people of the Kiziba country, were under the political jurisdiction of the Baganda district chief of Budu. The inhabitants of Ankole, a pastoral area on the west, though never subjugated by the Baganda, nevertheless sent large herds of cattle as tribute from time to time in order to ensure peace.

Tax-collection dates were set by the king, the prime minister, and the favourite chief, and then announced to the full council. The king appointed special revenue agents for each district, to which the prime minister, the favourite chief, the queen, the king's mother, and the district chiefs added their own representatives. Fifty per cent of the taxes collected went to the monarch, the others receiving fixed portions of the remainder. Each sub-chief was given a small part of the taxes gathered in his region.

Only the royal family was regarded as superior by birth. Hence, any subject could rise, or at least aspire, to the highest position in the kingdom through recognisably distinguished services. Knowledge of state affairs, bravery in warfare, and shrewdness in council discussions constituted the qualifications favourable for official advancement. In practice, however, sons of chiefs frequently achieved chieftainship in turn, since they had been trained from early childhood for such responsibilities.

The organisation of the Buganda government indicates its authoritarian character. The king had the right to appoint and remove all officials; as owner of the land he could dispose of it as he wished, thereby exerting powerful economic controls over the officials; he could advance or reduce any official's rank; he could ignore the advice of officials whenever he pleased, whether such advice came from council meetings or from individuals. Strong-willed Baganda kings have often exploited their powers to the limit.

In the ordinary course of government, however, certain accepted patterns acted as more or less limiting factors. A district chief, for example, seldom interfered in the relations between a sub-chief and his followers; the sub-chief was responsible for the actions of those under him, just as the king held district chiefs responsible for their entire districts. When public functions were necessary, such as tax levies, roadwork labour, construction of a royal house or a temple, it was customary to consult district chiefs on the labour supply available or the amount of taxes. A district chief would then summon his sub-chiefs for discussions on these matters.

Men who lived on a chief's land owed him allegiance. They were obliged to work and fight for him; but, since they were freemen, they had the right to leave a chief if they wished. In return for this allegiance and service, freemen received land to cultivate for themselves. It was therefore in the interest of a chief to treat his followers well, and this pattern served as a constant check on possible arbitrary rule at the lower levels of the society.

**The Ashanti:** Early in the eighteenth century several independent chiefdoms, located in Ghana, West Africa, united in a loose confederacy known since then as the kingdom of Ashanti. At the time, the kingdom contained a few hundred thousand people. The heads of the chiefdoms swore allegiance to the Ashanti king, at the same time relinquishing certain important rights and privileges which they had enjoyed as independent rulers; but they retained, as a group, considerable influence in the government of the realm, even to the extent of contravening royal decisions, if necessary. In fact, the king himself could be arraigned before this group, operating as a tribunal, if it was believed that he had overstepped the bounds of customary law and procedure. The Ashanti kingdom therefore represented a political type in which the spirit of decentralisation was fundamental.

Each chiefdom within the broad framework of the kingdom constituted a complete administrative unit, one almost a replica of the other. Further, the chiefdoms generally contained two or more sub-chiefdoms which also functioned as political and territorial entities—under administrative bodies patterned after the larger political divisions, but on a smaller scale. Some of these sub-chiefdoms were broken down into several political units, and in these again the same administrative principles prevailed.

In brief, the political organisation of the various parts of the Ashanti kingdom, from largest to smallest, was based on a single model, differing only in the number of officials and their degree of responsibility. The direct relationships between the heads of these political units formed the links which bound the kingdom together.

The political structure of one chiefdom may be used to represent the general Ashanti pattern. At its head stood the head-chief, who nominally ranked as chief executive and adminis-

trative officer, as well as supreme spiritual leader. Upon taking office, a precise statement of a head-chief's duties and limitations was publicly recited to the candidate, along with a warning to heed the advice of his councillors and never to act unless he had obtained their assent. Failure to observe this admonition was considered legitimate ground for the removal of a head-chief.

The office of chiefdom was hereditary, descending matrilineally in a particular Ashanti kindred. The senior female of the ruling kindred, called the queen mother, publicly nominated the successor to a head-chieftainship, but only after thorough discussion with, and the consent of, a group of officials known as elders or councillors. These officials generally sounded out the wishes of the majority of the people in selecting a head-chief. The queen mother and the elders also jointly held the power to remove a head-chief from office. When a head-chief entered on his duties he swore to observe customary Ashanti law, and in return the elders took an oath of allegiance to him. In addition, the head-chief had to swear allegiance to the king of Ashanti, a ceremony which fully confirmed him in office. He then joined the ranks of the king's elders, or councillors.

The group of elders consisted of two high ranking chiefs, a chief of kindreds, the leaders of the several army divisions, the head of the head-chief's personal bodyguard, and the head of the head-chief's household, to which a large number of official servants were attached. Many of the elders themselves ruled over sub-chiefdoms. They had their own council of elders, their own courts, and independent treasuries. Individuals who were tried in their courts, however, had the right of appeal to the head-chief's tribunal. Elders were obliged to attend sessions of the head-chief's court, over which the head-chief and the queen mother presided.

The villages in sub-chiefdoms were organised in the same pattern as the larger units, of which they formed integral parts.

Relations between the Ashanti king and the head-chiefs were clearly defined. They took an oath of allegiance to him; they surrendered the right to declare war; their power to impose capital punishment on their own subjects was curtailed, though permitted in special instances. The king, on the other hand, held the right to impose taxes on the head-chiefs, and he extended to every subject in the kingdom the right of appeal against judicial decisions rendered in lower courts to the king's court.

As a rule, the king and all chiefs leaned heavily on their councillors in the actual government of the territories under their jurisdiction. Lesser chiefs were for the most part permitted to manage their own affairs with a minimum of interference from the central authorities. Good government was generally attributed by the Ashanti to the system of decentralisation; and, since individuals were educated from early childhood, by precept and example, to know the tasks connected with government, political standards were high in the Ashanti kingdom and discords infrequent.

**The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa:** A large number of Bantu-speaking peoples in South Africa conformed more or less to a typical political organisation in which the basic political unit was the tribe. Each tribe generally had its own name, a recognized territorial area, and a chief at its head. The tribe was divided for administrative purposes into districts, sub-districts, villages, and wards, each under responsible officials. A system of councils operated throughout, assisting the head officials and the chief in governing the tribe and, at the same time, serving as a check on their powers. A characteristic feature of the Bantu political scheme was the hereditary nature of chieftainship; if the heir was too young to take office, a regent endowed with full power, rights and privileges performed the necessary functions.

The tribal chief enjoyed considerable privileges and authority, since he incorporated in himself the functions of ruler, supreme judge, sole convener of tribal meetings, war leader, etc. His responsibilities, however, reflected the rights and duties of the position. The chief was expected to guard the interests and welfare of his subjects, and to be available when petitions or grievances from tribal elements were submitted. The maintenance of law and order in the tribe, as well as the effective administration of political sub-divisions by sub-chiefs or headmen, devolved ultimately upon him.

A few individuals, usually close relatives of the chief and influential sub-chiefs or headmen, served as confidential advisers to the chief, assisting him in formulating tribal policy and other measures destined to go to the great tribal council for discussion. This tribal council comprised the chief's private advisers, all sub-chiefs and headmen, commoners chosen for their ability, and some of the chief's more distant relations. No new law or

action affecting the interests of the entire tribe could be put into execution without the prior approval of the tribal council. Decisions arrived at by the chief and his confidential advisers were submitted to the tribal council, where they were freely discussed or criticised, accepted, rejected, or modified. Since the council's co-operation was considered essential for the adequate government of the tribe, and its members did not hesitate to oppose the chief when necessary, this body operated as a powerful check on rulers with autocratic ambitions.

Every Bantu-speaking tribe had a system of local government that extended downward to include the village or even household. Large districts were administered by sub-chiefs who held their positions either through family relationship with the chief or because they were commoners of distinction. A council consisting of headmen of the sub-chief's district and the latter's private advisers aided in governing the political unit. The sub-district or ward, under the control of a local headman, constituted the smallest administrative unit. Like the sub-chief, headmen were also related to the tribal chief or were commoners of unusual ability. A small council composed of the headman's male relatives, important village leaders, and wise elders assisted in governing the sub-district.

The functions and responsibilities of officials throughout the tribal political system were fundamentally similar, except that those in charge of larger units exercised correspondingly larger functions and were subject to greater responsibility. Individual rights were protected by means of a well-established system of courts organised hierarchically, in which the privilege of appeal even to the highest judicial authority, the chief himself, was open to every tribesman. Political officials for the most part also administered the judiciary, aided by small groups of individuals recognised as experts in tribal law.

**The Zulu under Chaka:** Several times during the past two hundred years the political organisation of Bantu-speaking tribes in South Africa, as described above, underwent cardinal changes. These occurred when powerful chiefs arose who turned their energies toward amalgamating a number of independent tribes into a single political unit, either peacefully or through military conquest. Under such leadership, the Zulu, the Swazi, the Shangana, the Pedi, and the Ngwato, among others, developed into relatively great States in which one chief

ruled over several formerly autonomous tribes. The powers of the central authority in these States generally expanded far beyond that of the normal Bantu tribe, a pattern which affected the entire political structure. An outstanding example of highly-centralised, despotic rule is presented by the Zulu during its imperialistic stage in the first quarter of the nineteenth century under the famous Chief Chaka (or Shaka).

Within some ten years, till his assassination in 1828, Chaka managed to impose his rule over most of Zululand and Natal, bringing the many tribes he subjected by force into one nation. Interested chiefly in military matters, Chaka organised his warriors into regiments of men of the same age. These regiments were quartered for most of the year in barracks located in different parts of the country, where they engaged in military training, herded Chaka's extensive herds of cattle, and cultivated his fields.

During the Zulu period as a composite nation, its king exercised administrative, legislative, and judicial authority, and he had the power to enforce his decisions. He also acted as foreign minister in relations with Europeans and other tribes. Moreover, the primary religious and magical practices belonged exclusively to the Zulu monarch. He 'owned' the nation's regiments, which were mainly commanded by princes, chiefs or brothers of important chiefs, and, occasionally, valiant commoners. The king's family formed a powerful aristocracy which held the highest ranks in the land. Chaka placed his brothers in key areas as tribal chiefs and appointed other members of the royal blood to chieftainships. Marriages between the ruling family and families of tribal chiefs were encouraged so that strong kinship ties would bind the ruling class together.

Chiefs of tribes within the Zulu nation wielded only such power as the king delegated to them, principally in the administrative and judicial spheres. Although they could execute judgment, they had no power of life or death over their subjects, for this was the exclusive right of the king. Chiefs were also obliged to report serious crimes to the king. The chiefs of the various tribes served as a council with which the king was supposed to discuss matters affecting the entire nation. Within each tribe chiefs were assisted by councils.

Under a strong ruler like Chaka, the authority of councils was weakened considerably, in practically inverse ratio to the strength of the central authority. Chaka, for example, followed

a policy of keeping his chiefs at loggerheads with one another, thereby lessening their actual or potential power to act as a unit.

The few examples given above do not do justice to African experience in developing and carrying on adequate political systems. In actual fact, highly complex, orderly governments existed in every region of Africa before contacts with Europeans occurred. This was in part recognised by colonial powers. Under the British policy of 'indirect rule', well-established indigenous political institutions were utilised in the administration of the territories, with the reservation that the highest offices, and corresponding responsibility, were held by representatives of the mother country.

The brief descriptions herein given do suggest certain inescapable conclusions. First, that many African peoples have had considerable political experience over significant periods of time. Secondly, that Africans achieved stable governments which, in some instances, administered vast numbers of subjects. Thirdly, that those African governments fulfilled the essential tasks expected from governments in general. Finally, since large administrative corps were the rule, that a great many Africans had a thorough administrative and political training.

Translated into Western terminology, African political systems may be seen as quite comparable to all other systems, ancient and modern. The status, duties, and obligations of the ruler, whether king, chief, or family unit, were clearly defined in terms of the respective constitution, or better, customary law of the people. Similarly, specified roles were prescribed for the administrative officials who, in varying degrees, served as a check on the authority of the central power. The political and territorial sub-divisions into which States were divided for administrative purposes functioned as integral parts of the national government, according to regular systems of relationships which delimited the political authority of the parts from that of the whole. Well-organised methods for the collection of taxes and tribute operated. The rights of subjects were in most cases explicitly recognised and guarded from abuse by means of relatively elaborate court systems in which the privilege of appeal to the highest courts was a fundamental principle. Finally, popular will frequently found direct or indirect expression in the selection of rulers and high administrative officials, generally through the mechanism of representative councils.