

Human Tribes

THE CHIEF AND THE FIRST LADY



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We all have an image of a chief, do we not? This image is based on the nations of North America, whose culture is first gruesomely destroyed and later on greatly romanticized. This article is not about specific cultures or tribes but takes a look at the role a chief or leader has in groups of people, either modern or in the past.

Take a look at all the nations worldwide. There are Kings and Queens, Presidents and Emperors. We have CEO's of large companies, directors, founders, generals, captains and more. All these terms indicate they have a certain status, the ordinary man does not have.



There are several ways to get a status like this. It could either be inherited like the royal classes. In this situation personal achievements and qualifications are far less important than your family name. You could be stupid and still be King. Secondly you can be chosen or elected like in the modern parliaments. A third way is to earn a status by building organisations of which you as a founder or director get the highest status. A fourth method is to work hard, gain more skills and therefore earn higher ranks like an army structure and at last you could just be very manipulative and take hold of the power over army, police and all the media and claim your own position. Dictators are still very successful in several countries maintaining their own position. In the past it probably would have worked very well to kill the former chief and become the next one yourself.

ABOUT BANDS, CLANS AND TRIBES



Why do we actually have those chiefs, directors and leaders? In former articles I have only used the word tribe. It tends to get more complicated when differentiate between: bands, clans, tribes, chiefdoms and states.

Smaller groups mean strong related kinships. Each person is of high value to the group for hunting, gathering and survival. The more people living together within a small territory the more conflict possibly can arise, especially when other tribes are living close. Decision making gets more complex and so does the dividing of food, maintaining order and preventing misbehaviour.

The necessity of a ruler arises with the increase of people living together.

BAND

Small kin group, living and traveling together, often socially equal.

CLAN

Larger groups of several families, sharing the same ancestral stories and symbols, gained leadership.

TRIBE

Group of people up to several clans belonging to the same tribe but each with their own clan structures. People within one tribe share language and culture. Gained leadership.

CHIEFDOM

Intermediate between Tribes and state with formal political leadership, centralized decision making and justice systems.

STATE

Geographical location with political leadership that has a monopoly on force and law. Within a state multiple tribes or ethnical groups could live alongside each other with each their own languages and cultures. Nowadays we have nation states or countries. Ethnic groups can live in several countries but still share their own specific heritage.

THE BENEFIT OF A FORMAL CHIEF

When we speak of clans, tribes and Chiefdoms a formal leader is the solution for maintaining peace and create benefit to all. Or in warfare situations he would be the military leader. Smaller groups have informal leaders that gain their position by action and competition. The man who has proven to be the best hunter, the strongest or the bravest. His opinion therefore would be important. Gained positions are always threatened by new and other man, claiming this position.



CONTROL OF VIOLENCE

In non-state communities everybody is somehow related to everyone and everyone contributes to each other's needs. When a woman gets married her whole family will add to her dowry. When there is a feast, all persons related will add their share. When in turn they need help or assistance they will get help from their relatives. This leads to chains of informal debts and expectations hence and forth. This easily leads to arguments and dispute.

In smaller groups self-judgement often leads to spirals of violence. Anthropologists and researchers who had the chance to study cultures report of constant hostilities and warfare between groups that also trade and exchange marriage partners. Let's say a just married woman got ill and dies just after marriage. The women's family probably wants back a great deal of what they just had paid. This could easily lead to violence especially when both are from other groups. This revenge back and forth can go on for years. This was one of the reasons travelling was quite dangerous.

When you meet someone you do not know, is he there to kill you or not? This is an aspect Jared Diamond describes in his book, *The World Until Yesterday*. Being the first to kill the other unknown person keeps you safe. An official and chosen leader could help families to settle their disputes. A state has a monopoly on the use of force, preventing people to kill each other in conflict, leading to more overall peace.



DECISION MAKING

Another important aspect is taking decisions for the benefit of all. More people living together means more opinions and less agreement. A chief can lead important meetings, listens to all members of the tribe and in many cases he has the authority to make a decision based on all the information. When ranked higher, other members of the tribe can settle to this judgement.

The tribes of early Europe came together for in what was called an 'Althing' (Alþing). An assembly of free men held at a meeting place called a Þingstede or Þingstow. Look at the word Meeting. Is this a fusion of the old English word 'metan' meaning: 'to find out' or the Old Saxon 'motian, to meet and 'secondly 'thing' short for 'althing'? A king would serve as a judge in these Alþings and had the power for final decision making.

RITUAL LEADERSHIP

A third function is ritual leadership. This could be the domain of priests or shamans but just as well an aspect of formal leadership. The British Monarch is officially supreme governor of the Church of England. The Dalai Lama is except for his religious function leader of a nation (in exile) as well. In Egypt the Farao was both king and the highest ritual leader. The origin of the phrase 'son of God' applied to many important Kings and rulers from the past. Ritual leadership and functional leadership could go hand in hand. Their would still be a priest or a Shaman for healing people, for fortune telling or communication to the ancestors for example.

SHOW YOUR RANK

When having this responsibility as a Chief, being responsible for peace, making the right decisions for all and being able to act in important rituals, showing your rank makes clear who you are. It helps to establish a status quo. A sceptre, ceremonial staff, a throne or higher seat, a crown or headdress and more luxurious clothing can all add to the display of your 'power'. I would rather speak of responsibility than of power. The first is about the people, the latter is about the personal gain. We see quite a few examples of power in this world.

In our modern world and in corporations we see all sorts of codes. Directors and CEO's have their own private parking spots where others need to be in time to find a spare place. Their offices are more shiny and they wear suits where other employees wear jeans for example.

It is all the benefits that maintain these positions of Chiefs and Kings. The wealth and prosperity will cost a society more than a 'regular' member would cost. I mean luxury need to be gained, traded or made. It would at least cost time and energy but maybe valuable resources as well. The only logical explanation to do so is the beneficial aspects of having a Chief.



MALE AND FEMALE LEADERSHIP

Since the uprising of feminism we declared that men and women equally. This is historically quite a new phenomenon. It is clear that leadership positions have mainly been claimed by men. There are examples of strong women leading nations and companies or women who have played important roles in warfare, these are but a few exceptions in the many. There are even a few tribes that have a matrilineal structure, for instance the Mosuo in China. So sorry for all female readers, the written history, all but a few exceptions, show patriarchal leadership. The rising of feminism is therefore quite interesting in human history.



For a better understanding of ourselves, we could take a look at other species. It gives us clues how we as human species have evolved. Our closest relatives are the Chimpanzee and the Bonobo. Before they became separate species they shared a common ancestor with the human ancestors. So we are equally related to both species. In Chimpanzee society the males are the rulers. Even the lowest ranked male is dominant over females. Where in Bonobo society the highest ranked individuals are always female. Bonobos are less aggressive than Chimpanzees and female Bonobos cooperate with each other, protecting and form bonds whereas Chimpanzee females hardly form cooperative bonds. Nature experiments with all sorts of adaptations in species and shows us both varieties do work. However this difference between Chimpanzee and Bonobos leads us nowhere! Future will show what kinds of leadership we will choose from this day forward.

THE FIRST LADY / COUNSELLOR

As stated before, most Chiefs would likely have been male. That does not mean women were powerless or did not have influence. The royal system is based on Kings and Queens. Presidents have first ladies and men have always flaunted with their women. I think that the importance of women as close advisors of their husbands should not be underestimated, even when little written sources are available on this subject. This advisor, first lady or counsellor is an important link between the people and the chief himself. Whereas a king is hardly approachable, a prime minister might be. It is likely that this person hears and sees a lot more than a chief can see. Therefore he or she is an extended source of relevant information.

Kings, leaders and Chiefs benefit from close friendships and people they trust and whom they could counsel. This can be an chosen person, their partner or other family member. In America the President has an white house chief of staff, a non-elected employee who manages administrations and agenda's but is also called: "the power behind the throne".



MYTHICAL EXAMPLES

Even in myths the upper-ruler gods seek counsel. Odin, visits Mimir (the wise one) to learn and gain wisdom, mentor is the Greek advisor and friend to Odysseus. Modern writers of fantasy quite often use this principle of an counsellor. In Star Trek we see a captain and a 'number one'. In Lord of the Rings we see a kings advisor and in game of Thrones we see 'the hand of the king'. Although these latter examples are fiction, the archetype of an advisor who stands besides the king is widespread.

MODERN LEADERS

In many organisations and associations we have adopted the triangular structure placing the leader above all other people (see article in issue 21 - Human tribes). We have created bosses, sometimes with many ranks beneath. A Chief however is part of the total tribe. Although higher ranked, he is part of the circle, listens to all members and acts in benefit of all.

For modern leaders the question is: who is my 'Mimir'? Who has the wisdom I seek? Who are the Elders, the people who know a lot of the past and can therefore advise me for future decisions? And of course we now have choices about male and female leadership. We can take a look at the past, get all the good ingredients for our future 'tribes' and build strong organisations and strong tribes.

Questions to think about? Who are your current bosses or Chiefs? What makes a good Chief? Would you prefer a leadership position? Do you sometimes seek counsel, or do others seek counsel with you?



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