Political Life: Chiefdoms

- Chiefdoms are an “intermediate” stage between Tribes and States
- Probably emerged about 6,500 to 7,000 years ago in the Middle East
- Very common political structure
- Many societies were chiefdoms upon contact with European explorers

Political Life: Characteristics of chiefdoms

- Population sizes are in the 1,000’s or greater
- Kin based
- Differential access to resources
- Ranked society in which relations between individuals and between villages is based on differentials in power, i.e. unequal

Political Life: Characteristics of chiefdoms

- Leadership is hierarchical with a chief or permanent village headman (or headwoman) who occupy offices; establishment of permanent political structure
- An office is a permanent position of authority that exists independently of the person who occupies it
- Chiefdoms bring together a region under central political rule
Political Life: Characteristics of chiefdoms

- There are two types of chiefdoms:
  - Simple
  - Complex
- Simple chiefdoms resemble tribes in that the chief’s authority rests on his kinship ties and ability to redistribute collected goods.

Political Life: Simple Chiefdoms

- Simple chiefdoms lack true social classes
- Not egalitarian
- Political offices are inherited from inside a clan or kinship group, known as stratum endogamy.
- Simple chiefdoms only have two levels of political stratification:
  - commoners
  - chief
- Chiefdom status systems are based upon differential access to wealth and resources
- Status is also based on seniority of descent inside a clan or descent group.
Political Life: Simple Chiefdoms

- Social control still resides mainly inside the kin group
  - Marriage
  - Socialization
- Chiefs can legitimately use force to handle major infractions:
  - Thievery
  - Murder
  - Insults to the chief

Political Life: Simple Chiefdoms

- What are chiefs doing in simple chiefdoms?
- Collecting and redistributing resources
- Redistritution is generally equal amongst all members of the community
- Chiefs may actually give away more than they collect from commoners

Political Life: Complex Chiefdoms

- Complex chiefdoms have several layers of political stratification
  - Commoners
  - Officials, such as sub-chiefs
  - Chief
- However, there is competition for offices, including the chief amongst various sub-chiefs
Political Life: Complex Chiefdoms

- Chiefs are now no longer responsible for redistributing goods to all members of the society. Rather, they distribute goods to those who help keep her or him in power.
- Goods are now gathered as tribute instead of social insurance—that is, goods are gathered in a coercive manner.

Political Life: Complex Chiefdoms

- Chiefs now live segregated from the common people.
- They have special burials (ex. Mounds builders of North America)

Political Life: Complex Chiefdoms

- Social control becomes more concentrated in the hands of the ruling class
- Force, including military and work drafts, are now commonly used to handle collective action problems
- Kinship is still important for in family and between family relations, e.g. marriages