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Q3(a)

How do political organisations of simple societies establish power, authority and legitimacy?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Political Organization and Social Control

4. Political Organization and Social Control: Band, tribe, chiefdom, kingdom and state; concepts of power, authority and legitimacy; social control, law and justice in simple Societies.

Core demand of the question

- How do political organisations of simple societies establish power, authority and legitimacy?
- Write about 250 words for 20 marks

Revision summary

Power is capacity; authority is recognised right; legitimacy is accepted ground.

Bands use consensus and fission; Nuer segments mediate without a king.

Trobriand chiefs and Kachin gumsa convert food and marriage into rank.

Melanesian big-men build personal followings that do not outlive the giver.

Weber's traditional and charismatic types explain legitimacy better than statute.

Introduction

Simple societies are not without politics. They produce compliance through kinship, ritual, oratory, and feud, even when they lack a king or a police. Power, authority, and legitimacy must be named separately.

Body

The three terms

- **Power** is the ability to make others act, by force, gift, or threat. **Yanomami** village leaders and Amazon headmen often have little command power.
- **Authority**, after **Max Weber**, is the recognised right to command. A **Nuer** leopard-skin chief has ritual office more than a sword.
- **Legitimacy** is why people accept that right: descent, blessing, success in raid, or the sense that custom is as it should be.

How organisation works

- **Bands**, as among many **Andaman** and foraging groups, use consensus, ridicule, and fission. Leadership is situational hunting or ritual skill.
- **Tribes** use segmentary lineage. **Evans-Pritchard's** Nuer show opposition of segments, prophets, and leopard-skin mediators rather than a pyramid.
- **Chiefdoms** concentrate redistribution. **Malinowski's** Trobriand chiefs convert yams and kula into rank. **Leach's** **Kachin** gumsa chiefs claim hereditary prestige that can collapse into gumlao

equality.

- **Big-man** systems, as **Marshall Sahlins** described in Melanesia, build power by giving pigs and speeches. Authority dies with the man's network.

Sources of legitimacy

- Kinship and first-come myths. Ritual and oracles. Success in war and feast. **Weber's** traditional and charismatic types fit better than legal-rational bureaucracy.
- **Pierre Clastres** argued that Amazon polities work to prevent a separate state. Refusal of surplus command is itself a political act.
- Colonial and missionary offices later recoded legitimacy. Simple does not mean outside history.

Flow diagram

Simple politics -> Power force gift
Simple politics -> Authority office
Simple politics -> Legitimacy custom charisma
Authority office -> Nuer Trobriand Kachin

Conclusion

Simple polities establish power through gifts, feud, and ritual; authority through named offices and oratory; legitimacy through kinship, custom, and charisma. The state is not the only political form.

Facts & figures

Weber

Separated power from legitimate domination: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational.

Evans-Pritchard

The Nuer showed ordered anarchy through lineage segments and ritual chiefs.

Sahlins

Contrasted Melanesian big-man with Polynesian chief as two political economies of leadership.

Leach

Kachin gumsa-gumlao oscillation showed legitimacy as a contested, reversible claim.