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Q5(d)

Authority and forms of political organization

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 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

- Define authority and distinguish it from power
- Classify the major forms of political organization
- Show how authority operates in bands, tribes, chiefdoms and states
- Use named political anthropologists and ethnographic examples

Revision summary

Authority is legitimate command; power is capacity to produce outcomes.

Weber distinguished traditional, charismatic and legal-rational authority.

Bands rely mainly on persuasive, situational leaders.

Nuer segmentary lineages coordinate without a central ruler.

Chiefdoms join hereditary rank, redistribution and ritual.

States centralise territory, law, tax and coercion; Service's sequence is typology, not destiny.

Introduction

Authority is socially recognised legitimacy to command; power is the capacity to secure an outcome even without consent. Political anthropology asks how both are organised where no formal government exists as well as in states.

Body**Authority and political scale**

Max Weber distinguished traditional, charismatic and legal-rational authority. Anthropologists add that legitimacy may rest in kinship, ritual knowledge, age, generosity or control of coercion.

- **Band:** small, mobile and egalitarian; leadership is situational and persuasive. Among Ju/'hoansi foragers, skilled persons influence but cannot routinely compel. **Richard Lee's** "insulting the meat" shows levelling against boastful hunters.
- **Tribe or segmentary system:** dispersed communities coordinate through kin groups, councils, age sets and ritual offices. In **E. E. Evans-Pritchard's Nuer**, balanced lineage opposition supplies order without a central sovereign; the **leopard-skin chief** mediates rather than rules.

- **Chieftdom:** hereditary rank and an office of chief integrate several communities through redistribution, tribute and ritual. Polynesian chieftdoms illustrate ranked descent and mana, though **Elman Service's** evolutionary sequence should not be treated as inevitable.
- **State:** central government claims territory, taxation, law and specialised coercion. **Fortes and Evans-Pritchard** contrasted centralised African kingdoms such as the Zulu with stateless lineage systems.

Indian examples range from village councils and Naga customary institutions to the constitutionally sovereign state. Colonial indirect rule often hardened fluid chiefs into offices. Gender, class and dissent also reveal that proclaimed legitimacy never eliminates contested power.

Flow diagram

Band: persuasion -> Tribe: kin and councils
Tribe: kin and councils -> Chieftdom: hereditary rank
Chieftdom: hereditary rank -> State: law and coercion
Authority -> Legitimacy
Power -> Capacity to secure outcomes

Conclusion

Authority varies from earned influence to hereditary office and bureaucratic law. Bands, segmentary lineages, chieftdoms and states are comparative types, not a ladder every society must climb. Legitimacy, material control and resistance must be studied together.

Facts & figures

Evans-Pritchard's Nuer

A classic segmentary lineage system in which balanced opposition and mediation provide order without central government.

Elman Service

Popularised the band-tribe-chieftdom-state typology; useful comparatively but criticised as overly evolutionary.

Leopard-skin chief

A Nuer ritual mediator with limited coercive authority, showing that office need not equal government.

Richard Lee

His Ju/'hoansi work documented levelling practices that restrain domination by successful hunters.