Session 10 – Political system and Organization in Non-Centralized Societies

Lecturer: Dr. Rosemond Akpene Hiadzi
Contact Information: rhiadzi@ug.edu.gh
• In the absence of recognized leaders or chiefs, non-centralized political systems have mechanisms for maintaining law and order. This session focuses on Non-centralized political systems and their mechanisms for maintaining law and order.
The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

• Topic one – The characteristics of Non-centralized political Systems
• Topic two – The Nuer political system
• Topic three – Law and Order amongst the Nuer
Reading List

Topic One

CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-CENTRALIZED POLITICAL SYSTEMS
Non centralised political systems

• Non-Centralized or Acephalous political systems are also known as “Headless Societies” or “Tribes without Rulers”

• They have the following characteristics:
  – They have no recognized leaders, chiefs or kings
  – No clear-cut boundaries with their neighbors
  – No developed administrative institutions
  – No defined legislative and judiciary structures
Non-centralized political systems are classified into two:

- **Segmentary Lineage System**: where the largest political unit is the lineage: e.g. the Nuer of Southern Sudan and the Tallensi of Northern Ghana

- **Small-Scale Societies**: where the largest political unit are very small kin groups: e.g. the Bushmen and Pygmies who are organized in bands
Organisation of non-centralised political systems

• There are others e.g.
  – Autonomous village associations without chiefs eg the Igbo,
  – Village councils among the Yako,
  – Age sets among the Nandi of Kenya and
  – Secret societies in Liberia and Sierra Leone
Topic Two

THE NUER POLITICAL SYSTEM
The Nuer of Southern Sudan
Location of Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups

REPUBLIC OF SUDAN

SOUTH SUDAN

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

DR CONGO

ETHIOPIA

JONGLEI

Akobo

Bor

Juba

Source: Dr M Izady/Gulf 2000 Project

Dinka (11%)

Nuer (5%)
The Nuer of Southern Sudan

• The Nuer have almost everything that makes them a Non-centralized political organization
• They have no precise geographical boundaries with their neighbours namely Dinka, Anuak and Azande
• They have no single political leader whose authority is recognized and no judiciary and legislative systems
• The Nuer constitute one big nation divided into different tribes
Distinguishing features of a tribe

• Each tribe has its own territory
• The territory of each tribe is marked off by water courses
• Each tribe has a name.
The Nuer are a single tribe sub-divided into 40 tribes,
Each smaller tribe is further divided into clans and each clan is also sub-divided into primary tribal sections
Each Primary tribal section is sub-divided into Secondary tribal sections
A Secondary tribal section is also sub-divided into tertiary tribal sections
A Tertiary tribal section is also sub-divided into village tribal sections
Segmentary nature of the Nuer

• Alternatively, a tribe is sub-divided into clans and each clan is sub-divided into maximal lineage which is sub-divided into minor lineages, also sub-divided into minimal lineages.
• This is why people refer to the Nuer as a highly segmented society.
• This segmentation emphasizes the fact that at a particular time and under certain circumstances, the people see themselves as belonging to different groups.
• People who see themselves as friends on one basis become enemies on another.
• This kind of segmentation is explained by the principles of fusion and fission.
Topic Three

LAW AND ORDER AMONGST THE NUER
Law and order amongst the Nuer

- The Nuer have no regular institutions for law enforcement.
- Social control is not maintained by the systematic application of the force of politically organized laws.
- In this sense, the Nuer had no law but in a less exact sense, they were not lawless.
- In an acephalous society where conflict could break out at anytime, there was apparent law and order that characterized Nuer society.
Law and order amongst the Nuer

- Evans-Pritchard describes it as an **Ordered Anarchy**
- ‘Anarchy’ because the absence of a recognized ruler and laws suggests an anarchic or lawless situation
- ‘Ordered’ because although they had no developed legislative and judiciary systems, the people knew very well what their rights were and lived by them
- Even in conflict, there was order since there were rules regarding the way to fight enemies and relations
Mechanisms for law and order

- The Nuer used recognized standards to control human relationships
- Although the standard was too indeterminate to be called legal instruments, it worked to prevent total lawlessness
- The Nuer think in terms of
  - Cuong (right): rights and obligations by reason of membership of a kin group;
  - Duer (wrong): the failure to recognize the right or the infringement of that right)
Mechanisms for law and order

- A wrong has two meanings:
  - When a man actively violates the rights of another.
  - When a man refuses to honor his obligations towards his kinsman.
Conventional rules

• When fighting among themselves or within or between tribes, certain rules are observed:
  – No use spears, bow and arrows, only use clubs
  – No raiding of cattle
  – No destruction of water courses and granaries
  – No killing of women or children

• However, when fighting their neighbours like the Dinka, the above will not apply
Balanced opposition

• There a **System of Structural Principle of Balanced Opposition** among the Nuer

• This Principle holds that:
  – “No section within a tribe or no tribe within the Nuerland could exercise political domination over the rest”

• In other words, all the tribes are equal in power and dominance.
Among the Nuer, leaders of some kind exist, though they are mostly ritual leaders performing religious functions and they include:

- **The Leopard Skin Chief**: found in each tribe responsible for purification when homicide is committed
  - He extracts out the guilty blood from the murderer by cutting the back of the arm
  - He would initiate a compensation process between the families
Unrecognised leaders

• The Man of the Cattle
  – He is responsible for making known the beginning and the end of a period of initiation rites
  – He is also known as the Bull of the Camp in taking decisions as to where to move cattle for grazing
Unrecognised leaders

• **Men of the Earth**
  – The men of the earth are considered a kind of leadership in Nuer land
  – They help restore peace between warring tribes and this they do this by hoeing the earth between combating tribes
Sample Question

• Discuss the view that in the absence of a centralized system for maintaining law and order, the Nuer were not lawless.
References