

SOCI 222

Comparative Social Institutions

Session 9 – Political System and Organization in
Centralized Societies

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Session Overview

- Traditional politics is about allocation of power/authority for the maintenance of law and order. This session focuses on how African political systems are classified and practiced in different societies

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic one - The Political Institution and its functions
- Topic two - Types of political systems in Africa
- Topic three - Features of centralized political systems
- Topic four - The Dagbon Political system as a Centralized system



Reading List

- Fortes, M. and Evans-Pritchard, E. (1940) Eds. African Political Systems. London: Oxford University Press
- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and Change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology* Accra: Ghana Universities Press.

Topic One

THE POLITICAL INSTITUTION AND ITS FUNCTIONS



Defining Political Institutions

- The Political Institution is one of the critical institutions in society since it ensures the maintenance of law and order
- Political Institution refers to the socially and culturally constructed system of rules, regulations and principles that constitute a framework for the allocation, distribution and exercise of political power within defined political entities

Functions of the political system

- Maintenance of law and order as well as social justice
- Protection of members of society against internal and external aggressors
- Equitable distribution of scarce resources to all members of society
- Political office holders are tasked with the responsibility of decision making, implementation and enforcement

Topic Two

TYPES OF POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN AFRICA



Classification of African Political Systems

- Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes (1940) classified Traditional African Political systems into two:
 - Centralized Political System
 - Non-Centralized (Acephalous) Political System

Classification of African Political Systems

- The criteria for the classification includes:
 - Definition of Political Units:
Geographically or Socially defined
 - The Principal Office holders: Chiefs or No Chiefs
 - The level of Political Organization: Simple or Complex

Topic Three

FEATURES OF CENTRALIZED POLITICAL SYSTEMS



Characteristics of centralized political systems

- They have chiefs and kings whose authorities are recognized within geographical boundaries
- They have clear cut boundaries with their neighbors
- They have well developed administrative mechanisms for day to day administration
- They have well defined and developed legislative and judiciary mechanisms for maintaining law and order
- Examples are Ashanti, Ga, Ewe, Gonja, Dagomba and Mamprusi Political systems

Differences within the centralised political system

- The degree of centralization is however not uniform in Ghana and Africa for that matter
- In Ghana, Centralized Political systems differ from one ethnic group to the other depending on some factors namely:

Differences within the centralised political system

- The size of the territory
- The citizen's attitude to and reverence for political leaders
- The influence of the political leaders over their citizens and other sub-chiefs
- The degree of autonomy granted to the local and sub-chiefs

Forms of centralization in Ghana

- Two forms of centralization exist with regards to territorial boundaries:
- Centralization by Tribe: In some ethnic groups, centralization means that all those who speak the same language have one single kingdom or king e.g. Dagomba, Avatime and Mamprusi

Forms of centralization in Ghana

- Centralization by Independent Sub-Units within a larger Tribe: Among the Akans, Ewes, Ga, the group is divided into political sub-units which owe allegiance to their own independent kings or chiefs;
 - Example among the Akan, we have independent units such as Ashantis, Abuakwa, Denkyira etc. and among the Ewes we have Anlo, Peki, Kpandu and Ho among others.

Topic four

THE DAGBON POLITICAL SYSTEM



Centralised political organisation in Dagbon

- The Dagbon political system has all the features of a centralized system since it has a king, with clear cut boundaries and administrative, judiciary and legislative mechanisms



Centralised political organisation in Dagbon

- At the head of the Dagomba Kingdom is the Ya-Na, the King and Yendi as the headquarters of the kingdom
- The kingdom is divided and sub-divided into a number of hierarchically ranked chiefdoms and divisions



Centralised political organisation in Dagbon

- The chiefdoms are divided into **two** namely:
 - Royal Chiefdoms
 - Terminal Chiefdoms

The Dagbon

- **Royal Chiefdoms** are reserved for the sons and grandsons of the previous holders/kings or Yana
- **Terminal Chiefdoms** are reserved for members who do not qualify to advance in the ranking to the position of Ya-Na
 - Within the Terminal chiefdoms, there are two types of terminal chiefs:

The Dagbon

- Headmen are commoners in the society who are not from the royal family but are appointed as chiefs by the king due to their commitment
- Land Priests are the chiefs who are appointed by divisional chiefs due to their popularity among their people
 - At the village level, local Headmen and Land Priests have authority over single village communities and are responsible to the chiefs and their divisions.

Succession to the Chiefship and Kingship

- The system of succession to both chief ship and kingship is known as 'Circulating Succession'
- The occupants of the Royal chiefdoms are supposed to progress from relatively low chiefdoms until they occupy one of the senior chiefdoms
- The three senior chiefdoms are *Savelugu, Karaga* and *Mion* and these are the gates from which one can move from before becoming a Yana or the occupant of the skin in Yendi

Succession to the Chiefship and Kingship

- The eligible candidate to the position of Ya-Na must be a descendant (son or grandson) of the late Yana
- This candidate must have risen through the ranks to occupy one of the three senior-most gates
- Succession to the position of Yana rotates among the three gates(Savelugu, Karaga and Mion) and hence the succession is a “**Circulating Succession**”

Succession to the Chiefship and Kingship

- Other smaller chiefdoms are also reserved for the king's sons and are a gateway to these three main divisions
- They are given to princes who may hold several chiefdoms in succession before becoming Ya-Na
- For instance, Naa Mahama III, held in succession from Jankuma to Nasa to Tampiong and to Mion before becoming the Yana at Yendi;

Succession to the Chiefship and Kingship

- With regard to terminal chiefdoms, chiefs can also advance beyond their chiefdoms
- These positions are held by people who do not qualify to advance to become Ya-Na
- The principle in the rule of succession is the maxim that no one should achieve a higher status than his father
- This means that only sons of chiefs can actually become chiefs, at least in theory

Sample Question

- To what extent does the Dagbon political system qualify as a centralized political system?

Activity

- Read on the Akan Political Organisation



References

- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology*. Accra: Ghana University Press. (Pages 67-73)

