

## **A Brief Study of African Political System: A Case of State Societies**

**N. Baskaran**

Department of Sociology, South Asian University

New Delhi, India

bassau2014@gmail.com

### **Abstract:**

In this paper, author shall be trying to look into the attributes of the tribes reflecting the characteristics of the state societies discussed in the book '*African Political Systems*' by Fortes and Pritchard. There are five tribes that reflect the attributes of states societies, they are- the Zulu, the Ngwato, the Bemba, the Banyankole, and the Kede. Thus, in these tribes, we shall discuss in detail how there was presence of centralized authority, administrative machinery, and judicial institutions unlike in case of stateless societies that existed simultaneously in African political system that lacked centralized authority, administrative authority, and judicial institutions. Author will discuss only two detailed examples of the tribes regarded as the state societies; they are the- the Bemba and the Kede. The rationale behind choosing these two tribes were that Bemba as a tribe is slightly different from the other tribes as it reflects the characteristics of homogeneity of population unlike the other tribes of Group A. While, Kede, is a tribe that nearly represents a model of the state so it is important to discuss its characteristics in detail because these same characteristics of the Kede can be implied to the modern state societies also. It is an essential academic work which is book review oriented comparative analysis. It can be consider as a contribution to the existing knowledge of African study.

**Keywords:** *Political Sociology, Political System, State Societies, Comparative Perspectives*

### **Introduction**

Political sociology in that sense can simplistically be defined as the relationship between the society and politics or perceive society as a political system. Political sociology as discipline looks into four domains according to author - 1) relation of the individuals to the politics, 2) the characteristics and functions of the state, 3) characteristics and organisations of the political parties and related movements and 4) the politics at the larger scale of the nations. These four domains somehow precisely define for us what the discipline of political sociology actually looks like.

The "state" here plays a very important role in the establishing political sociology as a discipline. So, what becomes an equally important task is to understand and define the idea of the "state". The state is defined by Aristotle as "a body of citizen suffices for purposes of life." Aristotle's ideas had philosophical edges to them as he related the state to fulfilling the purposes of life. Thomas Hobbes in the early definitions of the state, called the state a monstrous leviathan like figure made up of numerous people that were enclosed in a particular territory. So the state, according to Hobbes, was a representation of its. All these definitions put together present us with the general attributes of an emerging modern "state" which is a representation of its citizens but simultaneously it legitimises coercion over these citizens through its paraphernalia of bureaucracy, administrative machinery and the judicial systems.

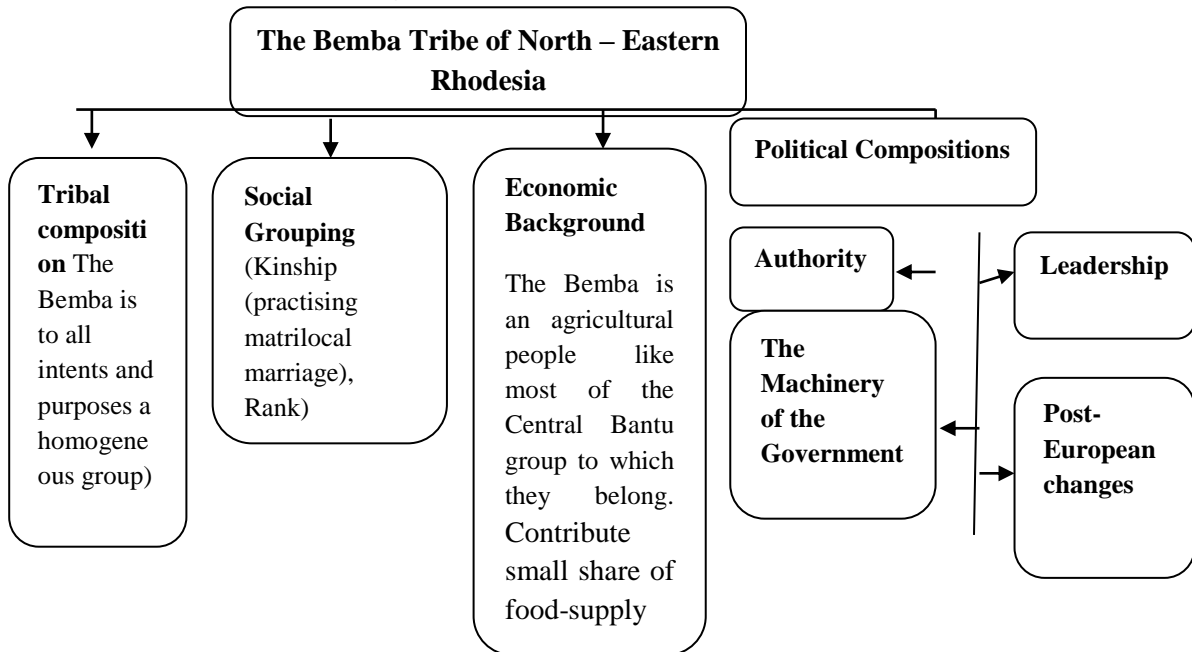
Thus, the state was not to be perceived as a scared institution but rather as a body that practices institutionalisation of deviance through practice of coercion like in case of Operation Blue Star in Amritsar.

**Objectives and Methods**

The main objective of this study is attempted to understand the African political system in the modern era. An important question that arise here is that why are we discussing tribal societies in the era modern capitalist societies. So in this paragraph author shall be discussing about the importance of the tribal societies in analysing the present political systems. Andre Beteille’s comparative approach might be able to justify the importance of the tribal societies here in the modern political age. The comparative approach helps to frame larger ideas and concepts about the society, that is to say, the ideas that is applicable to the tribal societies are applicable to the modern state societies as well and thus help us to study the modern state structure which would be difficult to study without the initial reference of the simple tribal societies. Such comparative political studies shall help us to move above the marked differences found in the tribes and rather to look critically into the common characteristics of the different tribes that help us to put them together under one single heading of African political system. These characteristics of the African political system can be later applied to the modern state system.

**Findings of the study**

❖ **The Tribes Reflecting Attributes of the State Societies**



### **Bases of Authority in the Bemba Tribe**

The positions of the leadership in the Bemba tribe consist of the following offices:

1. Territorial rulers (chiefs and headmen)
2. Administrative officers and councillors
3. Priests, guardians of sacred shrines, and magic specialists with economic functions.
4. Army leaders.

Succession to all these offices is based on descent. The super natural powers are almost invariably correlated to political authority.

- (a) **The Dogma of Descent:** To understand the basis of authority it is important to understand the rules to succession. The dogma of descent shall form the basis of this understanding.

The dogma of descent consists of two ideas- the first is related to the theories of procreation which expresses people's beliefs as to the physical contribution of the father and the mother to the formation of the child and the second idea is related to the people's belief about the influence of the dead members over the living, and hence social identification of a man with the line of his dead ancestors.

So, among the Bemba it is believed that a child is made from the blood of a woman which she is able to transmit to her children. Physiological paternity is recognised but identification with mother's line of ancestors is the basis of legal identification. The relationship between brother and sister is ritually and legally a close relationship. Therefore, these theories of procreation account for matrilineal descent on which the succession of chieftain is based.

- (b) **Legal rules of descent and succession:** against background of beliefs as to the continuity between one generation and another, the nature of descent and succession is defined exactly by legal rule. The history of the descent has to be remembered accurately in order to maintain the continuity of the chiefly lines. Therefore, the first ancestors are remembered very accurately and their sacred relics are kept. Unlike in most of the South African tribes where the heir to the chieftainship is known from the birth, in case of the Bemba, there are two to three potential heirs to the position although there are certain rules of priority. Some of the rules of priority could be: traditional order of succession to different offices, local feelings among in case of sub-chieftainships and also the personal qualities of the candidate.

#### **Functions and prerogatives of leadership**

The functions of the territorial heads i.e. the chiefs and heads seem to be derived from two sources – the position of the leader as the head of a kingship group and his role as a representative of a line of dead ancestors in a particular districts.

The sanctions of a chief's authority are numerous. The most important of these being the people's belief in their ruler's descent from a long line of ancestors and thus supernatural powers are thought to be conferred. The chief practised savage mutilations over the people who offended him, or injured his interests.

### **The Machinery of the Government**

Within each district, there are a series of officials, messengers who carry out the activities of the government and the different form of ritual on which the chief's power depends. All these different dignitaries can be classed under various functional heads, i.e.:

- (a) **Administrative:** These include executive officials in charge of business in the chief's village and those responsible for carrying out the chief's orders in the '*icalo*' at large.

These officials are charged with keeping the peace of the village, allotting land for cultivation, arranging hospitality for visitors.

- (b) **Military:** there is no general military organisation in this tribe, but, attached to each big court were one or two captains (*bashika*). Some of these were hereditary, with ritual functions connected to war magic, and others appointed at the chief's will. They now act as specially trusted messengers.

- (c) **Judicial:** There is no fixed composition to a Bemba court, although its composition was laid down by custom. The cases go on appeal from sub-chief to chief, chief to paramount.

- (d) **Advisory:** There is no council or meeting of all the adult men of the tribe for special occasions, as among many Southern Bantu. Sub-chiefs have a panel of village elders and relatives to advise them, while the biggest territorial chiefs have hereditary officials who combine political and judicial with ritual functions. In the case of the paramount, these officials – the *bakabilo* – number between 35 to 40 and form an advisory council on special matters of the State.

The main duties of the *bakabilo* in native eyes are ritual, as has been described. They are in charge of the ceremonies at the sacred relic shrines and take possession of the *babenyew* when the chief dies. Besides their priestly duties, the *bakabilo* acted as regents at the death or absence of the chief. They hereditary officials and therefore cannot be removed at will.

### **Post- European changes**

- The advent of British rule in Northern Rhodesia changed the position of the Bemba chief and his political machinery.
  - The total effects of white domination on the Bemba political organization has not yet preceded in complete length, but it reflected some changes produced by the introduction of a new machinery of government, e.g., the weakening of the personal relationship between the subject and chief upon which the whole structure of the authority depended.
- (a) **New Authorities Introduced:** In 1900, north-eastern Rhodesia was placed under the control of the British South African Company. Bemba was fierce and war like tribes, but the newly arrived authorities were better

armed. As a result, one by one, the functions of old chiefs were taken over by the authorities by force.

New court of laws was introduced though some Native customary laws were administered by the white officials. The customs that were considered ‘repugnant to natural justice and morality’ were prohibited; this category was vast as well as ambiguous for the Bemba people. Some entirely new offences were created like killing of animals or using primitive iron-smelteries. The penalties for legal offences were also changed, mutilation, enslavement at the hand of the chiefs was substituted by imprisonment, beatings and fines to be paid to the Government. New demands on natives’ goods and services were also made like the hut- tax, afterwards changed to poll-tax. The roles of the Bemba chiefs were recognised and defined by the administration and most of their powers were snatched from them.

Thus the sanctions of power for the new administration were the military strength and the endless wealth. Another system of administration was the coming of the missionaries to the Bemba tribes. They owned and cultivated land, attracted people for employments and then they used to ‘mission people’. So, now the Bemba tribe was again introduced to a new code of laws, often differing from those of the Government and those of the chiefs. Because most missions prohibited beer drinking, dancing and religious ceremonials of different kinds. Despite such strong Western forces and economic deprivation, The Bemba still managed to maintain some of its major characteristics because of their closely knit kinship structures and also because of the strength of the supernatural beliefs on which the authority was so largely based.

**The KEDE of the Northern Nigeria**

The Kyedye or Kede is a part of the large Nupe tribe of Northern Nigeria. It has most of its cultural traits similar to the Nupe tribe like same dialect, same kinship system and same religion (Islam).

1.

2.

3.

**Social Composition:**  
Cultural traits, Kinship system and Islam

**Economic and Community life:**  
Since Kede is a riverain tribe it’s economic and livelihood pursuits and general social life centres on the river.

**Social Organization:** The usual argument is that the Kede made it to the top of their social system because natural causes like environment and geography lent them the support.

**Political Organization**

The political system of the Kede corresponds to the concept of the modern nation state because the political organization of the tribe reflects attributes like centralized administration, government monopolized by a special ad

hoc body which has certain economic and social privileges. The Kede chief who is called the “Kuta” resides in Muregi. He has powers over all matters concerning the country and the tribe – above all, war and the finding of new colonies. He is also the judicial head of his country. The larger part of the taxes and revenue flows into his private treasury. He is the representative of the Kede country for the Emirs of Nupe under which is the Kede country.

### **Post – European Impact**

This above system got greatly modified with the coming of the colonizers under the Royal Nigeria Company. Kuta derives authority from a line of heredity and the mythical first Kuta. He also has a strong economic position because he can acquire a large number of canoes, which are the chief source of livelihood and defence. Also the most important political offices are allotted to his blood relations.

Political offices fall into 3 categories- one, a small group of rank holders “tcizi” (titled ones) who reside in the capital. Second category contains “egbazi” (delegates) who are in charge of the various Kede settlements and colonies. Third is household ranks (people who are loyal and able followers of the Kuta) working as his emissaries and messengers.

The succession to chieftainship is done from within his family. The prospective chief is usually appointed deputy (egba) and is usually the most senior titled relative such as his younger brother or elder brother’s son. Among the official duties of the delegates, 3 were of great importance- collection of taxes on behalf of the chief, maintenance of law and order and acting as an agent of the chief.

### **Taxation**

The present state of taxation is based on income and is progressive in nature, that is to say, rich people pay more taxes.

### **Judicial system**

- **Modern system:** Muslim judge (Alkali) holds court in Muregi. All legal cases of the district go to him. The native administration police assist him. Higher courts are in the Nupe Empire’s capital at Bida where one can appeal the judgement of a lower court.
- **Traditional System:** All judicial powers with Kuta or the Emir of Nupe depending on how serious the offences were. The matters relating to incest taboo and the religious matters of the kintsozi, who were Pagans and not Muslims were left to private settlement or public opinion.

### **Evolution of Kede State**

The common theory of the origin of state: every state organization derives from an external invasion and the conquest of one ethnic group by another. Kede example proves another sociological theory: Migration and colonization are not results of overpopulation but an expression of enterprise and adventure of some

individuals. However, the questions of whether the evolution of the Kede State was due to environmental factors or due to gifted and enterprising individuals, one cannot answer.

## Conclusion

From the detailed analysis of these tribes we shall try to conclude the general perspectives that are related to the state societies in the African political system. There are about nine characteristics that have been recognised by me which distinguish apart the state societies from the stateless societies.

1. **Governmental Organisation**: The tribes that belong to the group of state societies have governmental organisation as an important attribute. Thus, the status of the chiefs, class, the privileges of rank, territorial division of state (like *icalo in Bemba tribes*) and its relation to the central authority, the obligations of the rulers (like provision of food for the destitute by the headmen) also become equally important as a characteristic.
2. **Importance of centralised authority and administrative machinery**: All the tribes except for Zulu and Bemba appear to be an amalgamation of different people, each aware of its unique origin and history. Thus, the centralised authority and administrative organization become necessary characteristics to accommodate culturally diverse groups within a single political system.
3. **Relationship between the economic privileges and political responsibilities**: the people who derive maximum economic benefits in the form of rights to tax, tribute and labour from the political office also have the maximum administrative, judicial and religious responsibilities. E.g. Ngwato chiefs share equal amount of wealth as well as responsibilities while managing the political responsibilities. No such relationship is seen in the stateless societies.
4. **The territorial aspect**: The administrative unit in the state societies is a territorial unit, that is to say, the political rights and obligations are territorially delimited. Therefore, the head of the tribe is the head of the territory. Also, the territory is not only a political unit but an economic, judicial as well a ritual unit also.
5. **Checks and balances in the political system**: The different parts of the administration keep the check on the exploitation of power by any of the parts. So, if a king abuses his power, subordinate chiefs are liable to secede or to lead to a revolt against him. Similarly, if a subordinate chief is seen too be getting too powerful and independent, the central authority and the other subordinate chiefs can suppress him.
6. **Judicial system**: Earlier the judicial laws were administered by the chiefs and sub-chiefs. But, after the colonization, the native customary laws were administered by the colonial officials. So, mutilation, enslavement at the hands of the chiefs got substituted by imprisonment, beatings and fines to be paid to the Government.

7. **The incidence and the function of the organised force:** The authority or coercion used by the king is usually in the public interest. Therefore, the king and this team of delegates and advisers use organised force for the defence of the society as a whole against a common enemy. But, this organised force might be used as a means of legitimising coercion as in case AFSPA, where the very citizens of the country are perceived from the view of the common enemy of the state.
8. **Response to the European Rule:** The headman or the highest rank personnel eventually lost authority, power and independence after the colonial rule. He is reduced to a mere puppet in the hands of the colonial government. Thus, the colonial government take up the policy of **indirect rule** to stabilize the newly created political order. Unlike in case to stateless societies, the Europeans could not directly influence the political structure because the autonomy in these societies was arbitrary and thus, lack of centralised authority led to influence from a distance than directly attacking the political structure as in case of state societies.
9. **Mystical Values associated with the Political Office:** The members in an African society feel that their common interests in symbols and their attachments to these symbols give their society cohesion and persistence. The commoners in the Bemba tribe consider the chieftain to be the representative of the ancestral dead and thus are seen with high respect. This characteristic of the tribe contribute to a very strong king-subject relationship in the state societies despite the colonial experiences. Similar such relationships are based on mystical values were evident in other tribes that were considered as state societies. The stateless societies reflected slight deviation in this relationship between the mystical values and the political office because in the state societies the chieftain or the headman was usually the ritual head also but in case of the stateless societies, the king derived these ritual power from a different group of people like “Tendanaa” in case of the Tallensi tribe. So, all these features of these African tribes reflect the characteristics of what we call state societies. Interestingly, all these features are also prevalent in the modern state societies that we all are experiencing at present today.

#### REFERENCES:

- Callaghy, Thomas M., 1984. *The State-Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective*. Columbia University Press, New York
- Fortes, E & E. E. Evans-Pritchard.1940. *African Political Systems*. Oxford University Press: New York.
- Kopytoff, Igor. 1989. *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*. University of Indiana Press, Bloominto.
- Vincent, Joan .2002. *The anthropology of politics: a reader in ethnography, theory, and critique*, Blackwell: Oxford.