Review Essay

Chiefdoms, States, Cycling, and World-Systems Evolution: A Review Essay

Thomas D. Hall
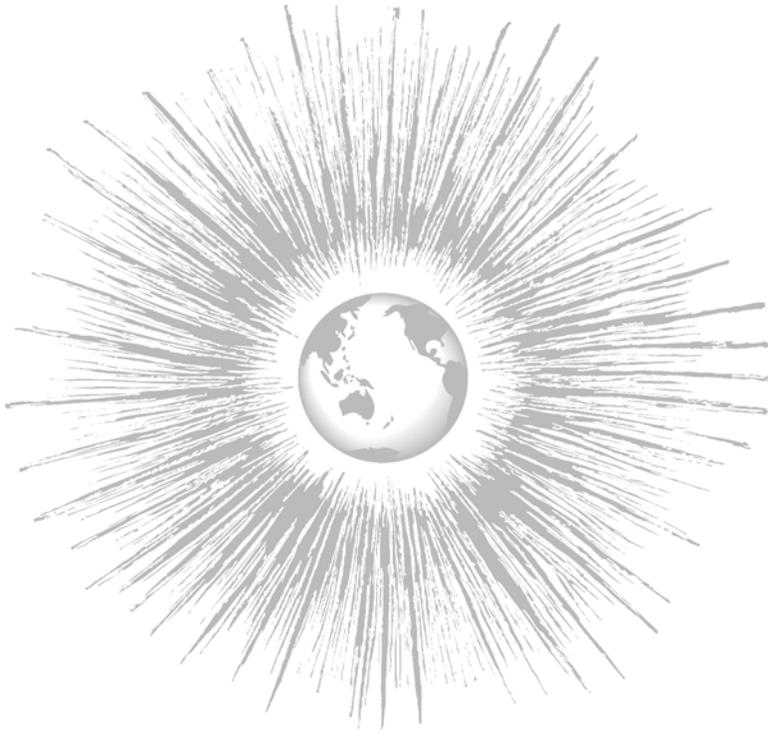
Why review a series of books and articles on the rise and fall of chiefdoms in this stet—other than my obvious penchant for reading and writing about such topics? The brief answer is that the kind of cycling (rise and fall) that occurs in chiefdoms has analogues in state-based world-systems. In particular, the probabalistic nature of the transitions from chiefdom to state means that there are lots of "near misses," or examples of failed transitions. The growing literature on such cycling suggests these transitions are the result of Braudelian conjunctures—all the right pieces falling into place at the right time and place—but nonetheless the result of systematic, or I argue world-systematic processes. Furthermore, initial evidence shows that ideology and individual actors play significant roles in such transitions. Kent Flannery (1999) argues that structure and agency rather than being antithetical, are complementary. Via several examples he shows how in certain phases of chiefdom cycling space, or opportunity, is opened for especially potent actions by leaders, and for ideology to play a much stronger than usual role in social, political, and cultural change. Thus, examination of such events gives some insight into the roles of ideology and individuals in system transformation.

At a mundane academic level, world-systems analysis often has been beaten with the club of ignoring ideology or culture and with omitting actors (ignoring agency). This is one avenue to address those critiques. More importantly for activists, insight into just how and when individuals can shape transitional processes is of vital importance. To be sure, knowing how the first states were formed avowedly will not offer a blueprint for building a more human world-system. However, the inventions of states do mark major changes in world-system logic (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997). Thus, knowledge about this first major shift in system logic might give

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some clues about how to think about when and how other such shifts might occur. Following Yoffee et al. (1999), it is also useful to study trajectories of change that do not lead to states. Without complete sampling of all such processes we cannot really assess how rare or common the pristine invention of the state was. Even if one accepts Sanderson's (1999) argument that the invention of the state was more or less inevitable, we still need to understand how and why it happened in one specific place, and how and why it did not happen in others.

I begin with an overview of David G. Anderson's *The Savannah River Chiefdoms: Political Change in the Late Prehistoric Southeast* (1994). This book is based on many years of field research as a staff member of the National Park Service. In this account Anderson combines archaeological research with various theories of chiefdoms and careful use of ethnohistorical documents. In this he provides a model of how to do such research without reading the present into the past, nor the past into the future, yet still gain insights from each for the other. This is extremely important in dealing with nonstate societies, because even where states and writing do exist, the very presence of a literate person is nearly always an indication that pristine conditions have been disrupted. By "pristine" I mean a setting composed only of chiefdoms, with no states present. This is especially important if one wants to examine how states were first invented.
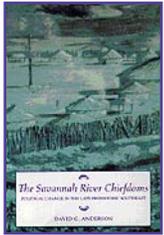
The opening chapter follows archaeological convention and defines chiefdoms as social organizations marked by stratification and redistributive functions of leaders, who are genealogically sanctioned if not appointed. By cycling Anderson means "the recurrent process of the emergence, expansion, and fragmentation of complex chiefdoms amid a regional backdrop of the simple chiefdoms" (p. 9). The oscillation is from one to two level of organization above the local living community (simple chiefdom) to two levels above the local community, with one paramount chief, several subchiefs, and village leaders. Anderson's figure 1 on page 9 illustrates this nicely. This instability is so common in chiefdoms that it must be considered characteristic of this broad range of societies. In what is now southeastern United States this occurred from ca. 1000 to 1600 C.E.

Typically the cycle of emergence, collapse, and re-emergence of a complex chiefdom involves movement of the center to a new location—a process reminiscent of movement of core hegemons in the modern world-system. Anderson argues that "understanding the political and social histories of individual chiefdoms requires the adoption of broad geographic and temporal perspectives, and that organizational change in chiefdoms must be examined from regional as well as local levels, using information drawn from both synchronic and diachronic frameworks" (p. 4). This sort of approach, of course, is axiomatic in world-system analysis. What is interest-

ing is that here this approach derives from the failures of studies focused solely on one living unit.

The second chapter on causes of cycling will hold the most interest for world-systems analysts—although one must bring one's own world-system approach to it. Still, the review of the literature on cycling, the various explanations for it, and Anderson's assessments of them are stimulating and insightful. Anderson argues that complex chiefdoms emerge when leaders use existing trade networks in exotic goods—often used to symbolize and link trade in more prosaic goods which level the vagaries of local crop production and hunting—to shore up their leadership symbolically. For emergence of pristine states this symbolism is crucial in supporting the chiefly class's redistributive function (see Flannery 1999 for additional examples). Only when there is sufficient uncertainty in production does the cost of the "insurance" become acceptable. In longer good times it is necessary to shore up this need by imbuing chiefs with all sorts of sacred qualities. Of course once complex chiefdoms exist they can continue through coercion and imitation. Even so, they remain fragile.

The sources of instability are many. As chiefdoms grow they often incorporate new territories, and occasionally new people who are not part of the kinship structure, so the ideology of kin obligations will hold little force. Even where growth is endogenous, the typical process of factional disputes leads to fissioning of overly large communities. "Overly large" here means straining the carrying capacity of the environment given of technology. Where expansion includes conquest, there is always the danger of over-extension. The key source of instability, however, is this: "*The fact that a chief's principal supporters were also typically his most likely successors, and hence potentially his greatest rivals, meant that factional competition was universal in these societies*" (p. 30, italics in original).

The other major source of instability is succession upon the death of the paramount chief. All the subchiefs will jockey for position of paramount. Because he is imbued with sacred qualities, his leadership inherently has a strong charismatic quality. Sons of paramounts do not always have the same qualities, even though they are better placed than others to learn them. Anderson notes that rebellions are typically directed at the person, not the institution—something almost inevitable given the charismatic qualities of the paramount.

In broadly open environments multipolar lattices can be expected, undermining stable hierarchies. When the environment is restricted so that trade and communication are more difficult, even shallow hierarchies will be rare. Here, however, there is a problem of scale. "What might be an unrestricted environment at the scale of simple chiefdoms may be a restricted environment at the level of complex or paramount chiefdoms" (p. 36). On pages 49 and 51 Anderson succinctly diagrams these patterns. A key point in his analysis is that many of the factors and processes that

promote complexity do not promote stability. To anticipate the last part of this essay, the invention of a state is one solution to endless cycling. Indeed, cycling can seem "endless" in that it those areas where states did emerge, cycling was present for centuries, and often millennia.

Finally, bounding territory is difficult. Typically markers of some sort will be built such as megaliths or cairns. Empty, or rather "emptied" zones between complex chiefdoms are common. In addition to minimizing contact, and hence conflict, these buffer zones often provide an important secondary benefit. They allow the local ecology to recover from occupation. Game can be replenished, and where slash and burn farming is common the soil remains abandoned sufficiently long to recover its fertility. Paul Martin and Christine Szuter (1999) re-examine Lewis and Clark's reports to map such zones. They show that areas that were thought to be rich or poor in game, were precisely the result of such processes which formed zones of heavy usage ("game sinks"), and buffer or war zones ("game irruptions").

After this general discussion of cycling Anderson turns to his analysis of Mississippian ethnohistory. He draws heavily on the various reports of the De Soto expedition (1549-1553). Anderson is acutely aware that state level intrusion, no matter how seemingly minor or ephemeral can have dire consequences for local polities. This is doubly so in the New World where Europeans brought with them, unwittingly to be sure, new forms of disease that had devastating effects on local populations. These effects are most profound on complex chiefdoms where population densities are sufficient to sustain them and allow spread of pathogens. Still, Anderson mines these accounts to learn more about how chiefdoms operate. Key points are the importance of ideology, prestige goods exchange, and warfare in maintaining complex chiefdoms. Within a chiefdom news travels quickly, but between them the buffer zones often block communication. Thus, in traveling within a chiefdom De Soto and company found themselves greeted and expected. But when crossing an empty zone, they found that they entirely surprised the members of the next chiefdom. Among other things, this suggests that these empty zones play a role in the divergence of cultures. When communication is blocked, new ideas and new technologies do not diffuse easily.

From ethnohistory Anderson turns to archaeology. This chapter is an excellent tour of how archaeologists infer political structure from remains, for example, placement of secondary population centers in ways that facilitate movement of tribute from villages to the center. He also notes that "locations of Mississippian ceremonial centers throughout the South Appalachian area were along major drainages and at macroecotones, at or near the junction of major phsyiographic provinces, and hence in areas suited to the exploitation of several different environmental zones" (p. 130). This type of location of course facilitates the chiefly function of risk-management. When successful such management underscores the value and superiority of the

chief and the chiefly class. Buffer zones show up as areas where there is little or no overlap of artifacts from different chiefdoms. The production and exchange of elite goods peaked between 1150 and 1300 C.E., and is associated with mound-building and warfare, both of which declined between 1350 and 1400 C.E. Most of these chiefdoms collapsed before the arrival of Europeans. Only Coosa was still functioning.

Most fascinating here is the discussion of Cahokia centered just outside of what is now east St. Louis. Monk's mound is only surpassed in size by the temple of the Sun in Mexico. It is the largest earthen structure in the new world. Cahokia's location at a major river confluence allowed it to control all four networks—bulk goods, political/military, prestige goods, and information—identified by Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997) as being typical of world-systems (see Peregrine 1992, 1995, 1996, ch. 4). When Cahokia collapsed, lesser centers arose along its periphery.

Anderson says of these four chapters, "I have attempted to show how ethnography, ethnohistory, and archaeology can aid in the archaeological examination of political and organizational change in chiefdom societies, specifically the emergence and decline of complex chiefdoms against a regional backdrop of simple chiefdoms." Indeed, he has done so superbly.

The next four chapters go through the southeastern evidence in considerable detail. Among many interesting issues is further discussion of buffer zones, which Anderson characterizes as having their own dynamics. He presents strong evidence for their existence. Also insightful is his analysis of the effects of climate change. He argues, at least for this region, that a decrease in rainfall of two or more standard deviations is sufficient to cause the collapse of a complex chiefdom. This is based on empirical evidence, including types of storage regimes in use. Another interesting finding is, "Whatever the explanation, the appearance of fortifications locally was almost invariably soon followed by organizational change or collapse" (p. 311). This suggests that fortifications indicate failure of chiefly function, and are not a marker of its success. Another interesting finding from mortuary evidence is gender differentials in nutrition, which strongly suggests that women already had lower status in these chiefdoms.

In the final chapter Anderson summarizes his argument. One remaining puzzle is why the collapse on the eve of European intrusion? It appears to be a combination of cycling and environmental change: a decrease in rainfall coincided with a phase of political instability. As noted the formation of a state can be one way that cycling ends. But Anderson notes that early, pristine states are also fragile. There is evidence that Cahokia was an inchoate state that collapsed quickly (see Peregrine 1995, 1992, 1996, ch. 4; O'Brien 1992).

One of the strongest conclusions to emerge from this discussion is the point raised in the beginning, that a regional — or a world-systemic — approach to social

change is vital to understanding the complexities of social evolution. Further evidence can be found in a recent collection that examines Cahokia in detail.

In *Cahokia: Domination and Ideology in the Mississippian World* (1997) Timothy R. Pauketat and Thomas E. Emerson focus on the role of ideology in regional control by Cahokia's elites. Their analysis is a counterargument to what they see as an overemphasis on material culture — a somewhat unusual position for archaeologists. After an opening overview chapter Pauketat seeks to explain the Cahokian "big bang"— its rapid expansion in the first 50 years after 1000ce. He argues that the Cahokian political-economy was held together by ideology. His argument hinges on the finding that the mounds were built by accretion. "Thus, the act of monument construction as a regular event was probably as important, if not more so, than the actual monument itself" (p. 43). Control of exotic goods was the means of shoring up legitimacy "...by controlling the production of meaningful symbols that were circulated within their own domains, [Cahokians] were in effect attempting to control the array of symbols that would inform the ideologies of the masses" (p 47). In short, the development of new ideologies was what allowed the "big bang" to happen.
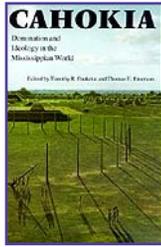
Neal Lopinot argues that Cahokia was not built on corn (maize), which was only one of many crops. Rather, the key to Cahokia was the stabilization of mobility, storage, exchange, and diversification. Lucretia Kelly finds evidence of status differences in cuts of deer meat consumed in different house types. However, the need to collect deer meat as tribute was eased by the ready availability of fish. Rinita Dalan shows that the construction of various mounds involved moving lots of earth, and began with relatively large constructions. Following arguments about megalith construction in Europe, she contends that construction was a means not only to symbolize group cohesion and structure, but to learn how to reinforce group efforts of the sort needed to maintain agricultural activities. Important throughout these chapters is abundant evidence that processes occurring at Cahokia were not unique to it, but were region wide.

Pauketat and Lopinot estimate the maximum population of Cahokia proper at around ten thousand at its peak, but with considerable waxing and waning over several centuries. For those unfamiliar with how archaeologists make demographic estimates, this chapter serves as a quick primer. James Collins finds decreasing status differences as household autonomy seems to increase, or possibly additional levels of sub-elites developed. John Kelly notes that the plaza of Monk's mound was outside the palisades, which suggests that fortifications more likely were for internal rather than external defense, which echoes Anderson's findings. He also argues that since rebuilding was more frequent than would be expected due to deterioration alone, it was a ritual exercise to accompany the death of important personages.

Thomas Emerson considers the roles of the countryside and ritual in Cahokian life. Emerson eschews debates over whether or not Cahokia was a state, and instead examines its relationship with its hinterland. Basically, evidence from the hinterland supports gradual evolution of simple chiefdom from ca 800 -1050 C.E. After that there is a rather sudden shift with complex burials, large plazas, and the appearance of a "woodhenge"— set of posts that resemble the more famous Stonehenge in structure. Emerson argues that religion in the form of cosmology and ideology, in this case elite ideology in competition with other ideologies, explains the rapid change after 1050 C.E. His argues that the Corn Maiden variant of an Earth Mother fertility cult "was appropriated by the elite as a tool for the domination of the commoners" (p. 228).

James Knight finds parallels to Cahokia throughout the Mississippian region, such as at Moundville (Alabama). He suggests that the sudden growth may indicate passing some sort of demographic threshold which makes complex chiefdoms nearly inevitable. He speculates that many of the societies that the first Europeans encountered may have been on the verge of forming complex chiefdoms.

David G. Anderson extends his earlier work (1994) in an examination of the role of Cahokia in Southeastern Mississippian societies. He argues "That Mississippian culture failed to spread everywhere across the East appears to be, in part, because it was an ideology tied to an organizational form — the chiefdom — and an economic foundation — intensive maize agriculture. Only when these conditions were present did the ideology have a chance of being accepted or differentially appropriated" (note 9, pp. 288-289). Clearly, many areas were ripe for this spread, and there appear to have been no competing or rival ideologies.

Pauketat and Emerson conclude that Cahokia was so large precisely because it was the first Mississippian complex chiefdom. Once others came into existence, those who found the demands of the Cahokian elite excessive could leave—and apparently did so. This led to the collapse of Cahokia. They explicitly argue that Cahokia was not a state held together by trade. However, based on their own evidence, the opposite conclusion is almost equally plausible. If Cahokia was a state, it was an inchoate one — which is what everyone who argues for the state position says. Certainly its rise and later collapse, were closely intertwined with the connections to its hinterlands and offshoots. Still, Pauketat and Emerson convincingly argue that ideology played vital roles in these connections.

It is this uncertainty that makes Cahokia interesting in itself and for evolutionary theorizing. Norman Yoffee's rule, "if you can argue whether a society is a state or isn't, then it isn't" (1993, p. 69) does not apply here. Rather, as he (1993; Yoffee & Cowgill 1991; Yoffee et al. 1999) and Joseph Tainter (1988, 1999) argue, collapses and alternative evolutionary trajectories are also part of evolutionary processes and should be studied in their own rights. And in studying them we can bridge the

latest incarnation of the ideologist/materialist divide. While Pauketat and Emerson's arguments for the important role of ideology in Cahokia's rise and fall are persuasive, those arguments do not vitiate the vital roles of trade and political-economy in those processes. Rather, as Anderson (1994) and Flannery (1999) argue, it is the latter processes, materially based, which create space for ideology and agency in the form of astute leadership, to play similarly vital roles.

Finally, throughout these arguments it is clear that intersocietal interconnections are crucial to understanding cycling and state formation. That is, there is a clear need for world-systems analysis in explaining them. This is, or should be, somewhat heartening for activists. While humans do not make their own history any old way they please (to paraphrase Marx), there are times when their actions can have considerable influence on the tides of history. Obviously, learning when those times are likely to occur, and what actions will contribute to which results remains problematic. The study of chiefdoms suggests such times occur cyclically, at rare, yet identifiable conjunctures.

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