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Leadership Inheritance and Acculturation among the Mekranoti of Central Brazil

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Anthropologists have long been aware of the indirect effects Western societies have on native cultures. A simple change in technology, such as the introduction of steel axes (cf. Sharp 1968), or a new form of income (Murphy and Steward 1968), may have unforeseeable consequences for native social structure and ideology.

But in the political sphere, anthropologists have been more interested in the direct or obvious effects of contact. For example, among some South American Indians new types of leaders have been created deliberately by outside agents to serve as mediators between Western society and the Indian cultures (Seeger 1980:115). Outside agents have also been used by local leaders to enhance their influence (Da Matta 1976:225-30; Holmberg 1969:145-46).

The indirect effects of contact on native politics have been less thoroughly explored. Wagley (1940) notes that a surplus of leaders among the Tapirape resulted from depopulation and the subsequent need of Indians to aggregate into large villages. And Murphy and Murphy (1974:193-95) observe that the development of individual trading partnerships between the Mundurucu and Brazilians undermined the traditional chiefly role as redistributor of goods. But more subtle changes in politics have gone unreported or unnoticed.

This study examines the reasons for leadership inheritance among the Mekranoti-Kayapo of central Brazil. Although outsiders have not consciously attempted to influence native leadership patterns, I will argue that the presence of missionaries, government officials and anthropologists in the Mekranoti village has indirectly made it easier for the sons of the Mekranoti chief to inherit their father's position. I will further argue that the influence of outsiders is a more important factor in accounting for Mekranoti leadership inheritance than are other arguments sometimes given by anthropologists.

Subsisting on swidden agriculture and hunting, the 285 Mekranoti Indians of southern Para State were first peacefully

contacted in 1953 by Claudio Villas Boas. But it was not until 1966, with the arrival of a missionary in their village, that the Indians entered into more or less permanent relations with Brazilian society. At the time of my fieldwork in 1976-77, only one Indian spoke Portuguese and none could deal well with money. Working primarily through FUNAI, the Brazilian Indian Foundation, the Indians traded Brazil nuts and native handicrafts for shotguns, metal pots, and other Western goods.

Mekranoti political life currently centers around two men's societies. These civic and political groups organize their members for collective hunts and fishing trips, and in the past were sometimes the basis for war expeditions as well. Each society also has its own sitting place in the men's house in the middle of the village; its own collective garden; and its own titled leaders—one of whom is considered the leader of the entire village.

Mekranoti leaders do not have clearly defined duties. Prestigious elders give speeches around the village plaza in the late evening and early morning and are expected to give talks to smooth over disputes that become public. Younger leaders do not have these obligations. They exercise their influence informally through suggestions given during men's-house conversations, or at other times to individuals.

In earlier studies (Werner 1981, 1982), I used Mekranoti data to examine various anthropological ideas about "egalitarian" societies. These studies showed that while the Mekranoti conform to many of the anthropological standards for an "egalitarian" society, they are divergent with regard to leadership inheritance. The sons of the village chief enjoy special advantages in acquiring influence.

LEADERSHIP INHERITANCE AND CONTACT WITH OUTSIDERS. When asked why specific people became leaders in their past, the Mekranoti gave many different answers. Some attributed success to intelligence, others to knowledge, and, especially for more recent years, some suggested that having a chiefly father was important.

As an example of a leader who inherited his position from his father, the Mekranoti sometimes cited the present leader of one of the village's men's societies. This man is the son of the Mekranoti chief who was contacted in 1957 by Meirelles, a well-known Brazilian Indianist. It is doubtful whether Meirelles intended to encourage leadership inheritance among the Mekranoti. But because of the Indianist's necessary closeness to the former Mekranoti leader, he also became close to the leader's family, including his son. It was his connections with important outsiders that seemed to enable the chief's son to

build up his own influence, and eventually become a leader in the current Mekranoti village.

More recently, the Mekranoti claim that one of the sons of the present village chief deserves the chiefly title because FUNAI named him as a leader. They are referring to an incident in which a FUNAI official made a short visit to the village. After being introduced to the main chief, the official subsequently met the chief's son. With intended humor, it seems, he put his arm around the son and said something to the effect of: "Oh, you'll be the next chief, huh." Normally the Mekranoti do not take such remarks by FUNAI so seriously, so this acceptance of a statement intended in jest requires special explanation.

I suggest that being the son of a village chief gave these men, as well as other leaders' sons, an advantage in becoming acquainted with outsiders and foreign ways. Temporary residents may not be aware of the special attention they give to the community leader's family. They may simply rely on him and his close kin as the easiest way to deal with others in the village. After all, the chief's family are the people outsiders know best and trust most. As a result, members of the chief's family become "culture-brokers." And because dealing with outsiders is an important aspect of community life, the "culture-brokers" become important individuals. The present Summer Institute of Linguistics missionaries in the Mekranoti village used three of the main chief's sons as informants in their attempts to translate the Bible into Kayapo. Two of the sons, including the one described above, now hold chiefly titles. To summarize the argument schematically: descentance from the chief → close ties to outsiders → greater influence.

If this model is correct, that is, if "close ties to outsiders" intervenes between "descentance from the chief" and "influence," then correlations among these three variables should follow suit—"descentance from the chief" should correlate well with "closeness to outsiders," which should correlate well with "influence." The correlation between "descentance from the chief" and "influence" should be somewhat weaker.

ALTERNATE ARGUMENTS FOR LEADERSHIP INHERITANCE. Anthropologists cite many reasons other than "closeness to outsiders" that might account for leadership inheritance.

Redistribution. One argument for how leaders pass on their positions to their sons stems from the literature on "ranking." According to this view, leadership inheritance is linked to redistributive economic systems (Sahlins 1958; King 1978). There are two ways chiefly redistributive roles could lead to leadership inheritance. First, a leader could simply hold on to some of the goods he acquires for redistribution, and then transfer this accumulated wealth to his sons. This argument would not work well for the Mekranoti. Aside from small amounts of rice from community gardens, and Western goods given to him by FUNAI, the Mekranoti chief does not carry out redistributions. Furthermore, chiefs are no richer than their followers. They do not differ in the number of their personal possessions and even have slightly fewer shotguns ($r = -.21, p < .05$). So they are not accumulating wealth in any case.

There is a second way redistribution could give leadership advantages to a chief's son. Although he may not hoard any of the goods given to him to redistribute, a leader may be biased

in the way he gives out goods. His sons may receive more than others. The sons could then use the extra goods given to them to carry out smaller redistributions of their own, thereby building up a reputation for generosity and a small following of economic dependents. This argument would hold even if there were no set moments when large redistributions took place, but only a steady flow of goods from the chief to his sons and followers. If the argument is correct, then we would expect "generosity" to act as an intervening variable between "descentance from the chief" and "influence."

Transfer of Loyalties. Another argument sees leadership inheritance as a way of avoiding disruptive factionalism when a leader dies (Burling 1974). By the relatively easy transfer of former loyalties from father to son, followers can deal more smoothly with the death of a leader. Especially in sedentary communities, where people cannot easily separate to go off with new leaders, it is important that political life continue as before.

The "loyalty transfer" argument assumes that fathers and sons share much the same loyalties. This assumption is called into question by the Mekranoti data. During my stay in their village I once asked all the men to name two people with whom they liked to chat in the idle evening hours. Most chose other men, but a few also named women, and some said they had only one friend or none at all. Most people named members of their men's society or age grade as friends. In fact, the final diagram of friendship links looked very much like the seating arrangements in the men's house. Fathers and sons had very different ties.

But although fathers and sons may socialize with different sets of people, it is still possible that having a chiefly father gives one an advantage in acquiring friends to add to a following. People may cultivate friendships with the chief's sons as a way of establishing good rapport with the main chief. Just as outsiders may be careful to get along well with the chief's family, so also may the Mekranoti themselves give the chief's kinsmen special attention. According to this argument, then, descentance from the chief gives one more friends, which in turn leads to more influence.

Family-based Factions. A third argument for leadership inheritance sees family ties themselves as the basis for political power. According to Chagnon (1979, 1980), Yanomamo and other primitive leaders are more likely to have extra wives and consequently more offspring than their followers. This, inadvertently, gives the leader's offspring an advantage in acquiring influence because they are part of a large kin group that can dictate its interests.

The Mekranoti are monogamous, so the argument about extra wives for leaders does not hold. But the main Mekranoti chief does have more adult sons than anyone else in the village. Still, it is unlikely that family members are always as loyal to each other as Chagnon suggests. In the Mekranoti past, village splits sometimes separated brothers from each other and from their fathers. In place of kinship ties, the Mekranoti used men's-society membership or age grade status as the basis for loyalties.

Also, the village friendship ties mentioned above were not based on kinship connections at all. Of the 107 males named, only 15% had demonstrable kin ties to their friends. Given the distribution of men's kin ties, one would expect by chance that

kinsmen would constitute about 18% of the friends. The results of 100 computer simulations of the selection procedure (assuming people named friends at random) gave an average of 18.4% kin ties, with a standard deviation of 3.38%. Thus, the number of kin the Mekranoti named as friends was slightly less than, but not significantly different from chance. Mekranoti friendships are not based on family connections.

But friendship may not be the only basis for loyalties, so it is necessary to test Chagnon's idea more directly by examining whether the chief's sons among the Mekranoti enjoy extra influence because of their many brothers.

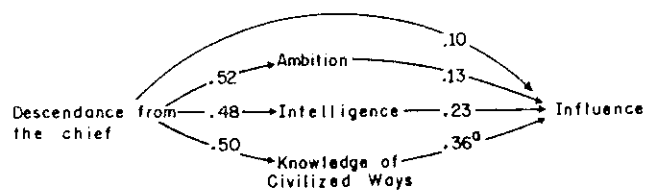
Learning. Yet another reason leadership positions may pass from father to son has to do with learning and training. It may be easier to become a leader if one grew up observing leaders in action or actually receiving special training for the job (cf. Wright 1978; Maybury-Lewis 1974:191-95). Among the Mekranoti there are many areas where a son can pick up special skills that might be useful for leadership. Roles such as shaman or haranguer (speech-giver) may require special training that a father, already versed in these activities, could give. Also, a son could gain special skills as a warrior, craftsman, or hunter from his father. Or he may have privileged access to knowledge of the ancestors, of ceremonies, or of things in general. Easier acquisition to these kinds of expertise could account for the extra influence of the chief's sons.

Inheritance of Other Traits. Besides expertise, sons may also acquire other characteristics from their father that could account for their leadership advantages. They could pick up personality traits—such as ambition or aggressiveness—that might help in the acquisition of influence. Or for genetic or other reasons, they may inherit their father's physical stature, or his intelligence. Any of these traits could account for the leadership advantages of a chief's sons.

TABLE 1. DESCENDANCE FROM THE CHIEF, INFLUENCE AND DIFFERENT VARIABLES

	Descendance from the Chief	Influence
Reputation for generosity	.12	.53 ^c
Number of conversational friends	.20	.45 ^c
Number of brothers	.65 ^c	.44 ^c
Role as haranguer	-.11	.45 ^c
Role as shaman	-.17	.28 ^a
Warrior	.26 ^a	.59 ^c
Craftsman	.19	.64 ^c
Hunter	.39 ^c	.34 ^b
Knowledge of ancestors	.16	.60 ^c
Knowledge of ceremonies	.39 ^c	.71 ^c
Knowledge of Indians (general)	.02	.55 ^c
Ambition	.52 ^c	.54 ^c
Aggressiveness	.26 ^a	.48 ^c
Height	.23 ^a	.41 ^c
Intelligence	.48 ^c	.63 ^c
Knowledge of civilized ways	.50 ^c	.66 ^c

^a $p < .05$.
^b $p < .01$.
^c $p < .001$.



^a $p < .05$

FIGURE 1. PATH ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCE AND DESCENDANCE FROM THE CHIEF

TESTING THE ARGUMENTS. Testing these different explanations for leadership inheritance required the coding of many different variables. For "height" I simply used actual measurements. For friendship ties I asked people to name two individuals they generally conversed with at night. For the other codes I relied on peer ratings. Using a table of random numbers, I placed Mekranoti adults into random samples of 15 individuals each. (All adults were chosen for one sample or another.) Members of each sample were asked to give me the names of ten Mekranoti men and ten Mekranoti women in response to a set of questions asked of everyone in that sample. For example, I asked for the names of people who were "generous," who "knew a lot about the ancestors," who "were good warriors," or who "were intelligent." All Mekranoti adults could then be coded for various traits based on the number of "votes" they received for each question. For some traits, I asked for responses from two samples. Comparisons showed inter-sample correlations between .66 and .91, indicating fairly high cross-sample reliabilities.

Leadership codings were also based on the peer ratings. I asked two samples to name ten men and ten women whose "advice, orders, or suggestions" were followed by the Indians. For the men, "votes" from the peer ratings correlated .59 with the titled positions for "chief," (*benjadjwyr*). For the women the correlation was .66. Exceptions were easily explainable as due to alternate meanings of the word, *benjadjwyr*. In addition, I also observed a sample of men during men's-house meetings, recording acts of influence (giving advice, addressing a larger audience) and acts of "noninfluence" (getting interrupted during speaking, failure to get responses). The men's-house observations correlated .58 with the peer ratings. (See Werner 1981 for a discussion of leadership measurements.)

The correlation between "descendance from the chief" and influence was .46 ($p < .001$) for the men. For women, the correlation was not significant, so I do not discuss them here. (See Werner in press for male/female differences in influence.)

Table 1 shows the correlations of the other variables with

TABLE 2. BREAKDOWN OF PATHS BETWEEN DESCENDANCE FROM THE CHIEF AND INFLUENCE

Original correlation	.46
Direct path	.10
Indirect paths via:	
Ambition	.07
Intelligence	.11
Knowledge of civilized ways	.18

both "influence" and "descendance from the chief." Only "ambition," "intelligence," and "knowledge of civilized ways" (taken as an indicator of closeness to outsiders) showed correlations higher than .46 with both "descendance from the chief" and "influence." These variables, then, are the most likely to account for the greater influence of the chief's descendants.

Figure 1 and Table 2 show the results of a path analysis placing these three "intervening" variables between "descendance from the chief" and "influence." As is clear from the analysis, "knowledge of civilized ways," is the major intervening variable. It accounts for 39% (.18/.46) of the original correlation between "descendance from the chief" and "influence" (Table 2).

CONCLUSION. This study suggests that Mekranoti leadership inheritance was enhanced, in a rather subtle fashion, by contact. Even while attempting to maintain local systems of authority, missionaries, government administrators, and anthropologists can inadvertently change these systems. This should serve as a warning to outsiders to be careful of the way their interactions with native groups can affect local politics.

The need to work through "culture-brokers" may have similar effects in more modern situations. Moran (1975) describes how patron-client relationships arose in Brazilian colonization projects, even though administrators tried to avoid this development. In Moran's case, the difficulties in acquiring credit encouraged farmer-colonists to work through local "culture-brokers," who later became patrons. Thus, the "culture-broker" argument for leadership inheritance may have implications beyond changes in native cultures, and is deserving of further research.

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