

**WEALTH AND HIERARCHY
IN THE INTERMEDIATE AREA**

A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks
10TH AND 11TH OCTOBER 1987

Frederick W. Lange, *Editor*

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Thoughts on Public Symbols and Distant Domains Relevant to the Chiefdoms of Lower Central America

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INTRODUCTION

IN A RECENT PAPER dealing with the structure and functioning of chiefdoms, Charles Spencer (1987), building on a discussion by Henry Wright (1977), reiterates that decision-making authority in chiefdoms is generally distributed between two basic hierarchical levels, that of the local community and that of the wider region. Authority is centralized on both levels, but is notably generalized, lacking in significant internal administrative specializations, and characterized by minimal internal differentiation of leadership roles (Spencer 1987: 372).¹ This means, in effect, that the jobs of regional and local chiefs differ only in degree, and that it is thereby difficult for a regional chief to delegate part of his authority to local-level associates (who, it is important to note, are also likely to be kinsmen), for whenever he does so he risks political challenge and possible usurpation. A regional chief's main recourse in such a situation is to encourage community leaders to be as self-sufficient as possible with respect to regulatory problems existing on their level, while he attempts to coordinate activities pertaining to the region as a whole. This strategy, however, raises the problem for a regional chief of how to foster local self-regulation, which will enhance local leaders' power and yet maintain wider political allegiance and a higher political position for himself (Spencer 1987: 376).

Spencer notes several mechanisms that assist the regional chief to overcome this administrative challenge: (a) sanctification of authority, in which the chief is identified with important supernatural forces or beings and is enveloped in religious ceremonialism; (b) fostering of alliances by

¹ Chiefdom governmental organization contrasts in this respect with the much more specialized and internally differentiated administrative organization characteristic of states.

marriage or fictive kinship between himself and community leaders; (c) acquisition of scarce prestige goods from distant regions to be used as status symbols and exchange items with community leaders; (d) interpolity warfare that both generates booty and imposes a degree of discipline (and, I might add, probably a degree of regional identification) on military supporters (Spencer 1987: 376). Stated somewhat differently, Spencer is saying that regional chiefly authority is supported by particular activities that to some extent are situated within the regional polity and to some extent outside the polity, or that have "internal" and/or "external" dimensions.

My interest in this chapter is with several of the "external" activities or dimensions of chiefly authority cited by Spencer, particularly those dealing with sanctification of authority as an aspect of sociopolitical hierarchy and acquisition of prestige goods as an aspect of elite wealth. I suggest that in a given sociopolitical setting both sanctification of authority and acquisition of scarce prestige goods from afar (as well as interpolity warfare which, however, will not be considered here) may be understood as aspects of a wider cosmological domain. Which is to say, working within the general framework of the dual themes of wealth and hierarchy that relate all the papers in this volume, I wish to explore particular aspects of hierarchy and of elite wealth that can be interpreted within cosmological contexts and to recognize and emphasize the considerable political-ideological significance that cosmology carried for chiefly politics.

A number of distinguishing characteristics of cosmological domains in general have been elucidated by a wide range of scholars, who have examined the political-ideological importance of the concept of the *axis mundi* and of the "center" (heartland) and considered the legitimizing qualities deriving from chiefly association with deities, ancestral spirits, and diverse other sacred powers and attributes associated with that center. In previous work on Pre-Columbian Panamanian chiefdoms (Helms 1979) and in a more recent work (Helms 1988), I have drawn attention to the political-ideological significance of the "periphery," or geographically distant hinterland, and have posited that in non-industrial societies geographical distance from a given center correlates with supernatural qualities in a manner directly analogous to the familiar correlation of "vertical" distance, or the vertical cosmological axis, with supernatural qualities. As one proceeds outward from the political-ideological center or heartland in any direction—vertically and/or horizontally—one enters domains of cosmological and, therefore, political-ideological significance. It is within this overall perspective that we may find common ground between foreign prestige goods and sanctification of chiefly authority, that is, between aspects of elite wealth and the maintenance of sociopolitical hierarchy. In pursuing this topic, reference will be made generally to chiefdoms of the Intermediate

Area (the territory between Mesoamerica to the north and the Andean empires of South America), with particular emphasis on the ranked polities of Lower Central America (the territory ranging from central and eastern Honduras through Panama).

QUALITIES OF COSMOLOGICAL REALMS

Evidencing at points a firm grasp of the obvious, I wish first of all to compare in general terms qualities or characteristics of the "vertical" domain or dimension of cosmological distance with those of the "horizontal" (geographical) domain or dimension of cosmological distance. I then posit that access to both domains can be essential to the maintenance of regional chiefly status and authority and that there are important similarities and perhaps even more important differences in the manner by which such access is effected and evidenced.

Underlying my discussion are several assumptions: first, that indigenous polities of Lower Central America basically were organized hierarchically along the lines of the two-tiered (community and region) model suggested by Spencer and Wright (see Ferrero 1981: 100, regarding "grand chiefs" and "principal chiefs," and Helms 1979 regarding *quevis* and *sacos*); second, that the numerous chiefs of Lower Central America were thoroughly involved in the manipulation of the two cosmological dimensions (vertical and horizontal) both as individual political leaders and as colleague-competitors in networks of intrapolity and interpolity elite interactions; third, that we may acquire useful insight into some of the assumptions, situations, and processes by which they operated by consideration of general issues that may give fuller context to the tantalizing evidence of archaeology and ethnohistorical materials.

In native ideologies of tropical America (and elsewhere) both vertical and horizontal dimensions of external distance are perceived to be sources of the all-pervasive cosmological power that activates the universe and is expressed in the dynamics of life and death, health and illness, fertility and reproduction—characteristics of all living things. In the vertical cosmological dimension this power assumes tangible form in the celestial bodies (sun, moon, stars) and weather of the heavens above and in the flowing waters, minerals (e.g., salt), precious stones and ores, plants, and other products derived from (brought up from) the interior of the earth and sea. In the horizontal dimension this power receives tangible form in practically any form of material goods (including all manner of plants and animals, people, and virtually any kind of seemingly [to us] inanimate objects) that originate in earthly places that are far away by land or sea (just how far is far may vary greatly and is an empirical question to be ascertained in each instance). Cosmological power is also believed to exist in generally invisible spirits,

ogres, or deities inhabiting both dimensions and is also expressed in the esoteric knowledge that informs people "at home" about these power-filled domains (see Roe 1982: 136, 138; Hugh-Jones 1979; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981; Hunt 1977; Gossen 1974).

Though cosmological power is believed to exist in both vertically and horizontally "distant" settings, human means of contacting these domains is not the same, for the "distance" involved in reaching these extraordinary places is traversed in different ways. As we are all well aware, the vertical cosmological dimension is attained by techniques of *spiritual* travel in which the soul or intangible "essence" of the actor effects communication, perhaps by "traveling" itself to otherworldly levels or spheres or, alternatively, by asking deities to do the traveling to the supplicant, while the participant himself remains generally motionless in sleep or in trance or perhaps sits or stands quietly while engaged in divination or supplication. In contrast, distant horizontal cosmological locales are generally reached and explored by *physical* travel in which members of the home society bodily venture forth or foreigners come as visitors to the home center.

Yet, just as the vertical and horizontal domains tend to merge into one overall cosmological context, so the significance of communication or contact can be interchanged. For example, the Incas sometimes consulted oracles that were horizontally distant ("out of sight") in space from Cuzco in order to learn of things that were distant in time (in the past and the future) (Zuidema 1982: 432, 434). Similar spiritual and physical trips can be combined whenever physical journeys are made to horizontally (geographically) distant shrines or pilgrimage centers (e.g., Dabeiba, in the western cordillera of Colombia, and perhaps the town now known as San Jose Cabecar in Costa Rica; see Helms 1979: 156-157; Ferrero 1981: 102). Now closer to home, a comparable physical removal or separation of the supplicant from ordinary life and society is effected at least minimally by attending to spiritual communication in the privacy of a separate dwelling or religious structure, as when priestly *tequinas* entered the seclusion of a small *surpa* to make divinations in sixteenth-century Panama (Helms 1979: 110, 156).

Perhaps most important of all for the issue of chiefly authority are the diverse ways in which contact with distant realms are socially or publicly evidenced by those who claim to have been there, for presentation of compelling evidence of such communication brings the qualities and powers of supernatural distance directly into the social-political realm at home. To some extent contact with the vertical dimension of the cosmos is likely to be open to all initiated or adult (male) persons, at the very least as ceremonial observers or as participants of low degree. But shamans and priests obviously command more intensive or more persistent spiritual contacts,

and—as in ancient Panama and Costa Rica—may pragmatically evidence their cosmological associations and derivative powers by curing illness, divining future events, and controlling weather and agricultural productivity (Helms 1979: 110-111; Ferrero 1981: 102).

In a sense, however, although these activities are believed to involve priests and shamans as intermediaries with various spirit entities, they are at best *indirect* expressions of supernatural powers and support. The efficacy of shamanic or priestly expertise is measured by results: for example, by renewed health or fruitful fields. The actual power with which or by which these practitioners are believed to work is harder to capture or contain in a tangible way.

To some extent such power may be confined within the person of the religious practitioner himself, at least when professionally engaged in his craft or calling. This containment is a reflection of the common belief that individual skills and abilities in general are the result or expression of extraordinary supernatural powers of some sort (e.g., the Kuna concept of *kurgin*; see also Ferrero 1981: 103). Thus craftsmen and artisans skilled in other modes of expression of esoteric knowledge, including potters who mold and paint polychrome ceramics, metallurgists who shape gold and copper into intriguingly designed ornamentation, weavers who create and decorate fine textiles, sculptors who carve bone and stone and wood, are often thought to be endowed with exceptional, mystical powers and knowledge. ("The artisan is a connoisseur of secrets, a magician": Eliade 1962: 102).²

In addition, the resulting textiles, ceramics, sculptures, or adornments may be given shapes, textures, colors, and designs that convey esoteric sacred or supernatural concepts (Helms 1979: 111; Tedlock and Tedlock 1985; Wilbert 1974; Lechtman 1975). Yet here again, it is the result of exceptional abilities and skills that remains in the finished tangible object. To be sure, these crafted goods may acquire some degree of aura from the particular raw materials from which they are made, as evidenced, for example, by the types of woods used in Kuna curing dolls (Howe 1977: 145-149) and the ritual surrounding gold mining in Pre-Columbian Central and South America (Sauer 1966: 134; Feldman 1978: 69; see also Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981). They may also be valued for the forms or designs given them (Linares 1977; Helms 1981). Nonetheless, the supernatural derivation of the exceptional acts (skills) of crafting which produced them and which they evidence further endows these goods, providing them with much of their aesthetic, sociopolitical, and symbolic value.

² "When the Mekranoti want to express how intelligent a man is they often refer to the things he knows how to make" (Werner 1981: 366). "In a way, all true Warao uasi [expert craftsmen] are religious practitioners who mediate the powers of their natural and supernatural environments" (Wilbert 1979: 144-145).

Although by this line of argument crafted material goods constitute in and of themselves mainly indirect evidence of supernatural association, such goods (including textiles, painted and modeled ceramics, polished stone sculptures, carved wooden pieces, jewelry and adornments of precious stones and metals, feathers, furs), like shamanic and priestly services, are readily displayed by chiefs, particularly regional chiefs, as public symbols attesting both to their high status and to their own association with mystical cosmic powers. In this context, it is noteworthy that in Lower Central America chiefs themselves may have been skilled in select crafts such as metallurgy (Helms 1979: 147; Stone 1977: 127-128). It is obviously appropriate, too, that chiefs attract and subsidize the services of the best artisans (whether they be part-time or full-time specialists), who may be settled at the chiefly compound, as metalworkers were at Dabeiba (Helms 1979: 155; see also Graham 1981: 131), or may move about from chief to chief in a more itinerant manner (Haberland 1984: 251; Willey 1984: 370), they themselves serving as "public symbols" of chiefly affairs. We might also consider the priests and shamans who consult various omens and oracles and construct divinations and cures to constitute another comparable category of chiefly public symbol, for priests and shamans, like artisans, can tap the powers of the vertical cosmological realm and use them to create tangible evidence of chiefly status and legitimacy.

Appreciation of the significance of public evidence of contact with horizontal distance may require a shift in emphasis from that accorded public evidence of contact with vertical distance. The most tangible indication of such contact again is found in material goods: goods, whether in the form of raw materials or of already crafted pieces, that are significant now because they are derived not from local sacred places (though, if raw materials, they may be locally crafted) but from geographically distant and foreign locales. I suggest that to those seeking to acquire them, these goods are important because they may be regarded as literally composed of, or filled with, the mystical, supernatural aura of their foreign place of origin. They may constitute actual pieces, fragments, of that realm, like relics, replete with power of a distant cosmological place now brought home (Sumption 1975: 24, 29-31). Although the contrast should be seen in relative terms, compared to the more derivative nature of tangible evidence of vertical cosmological contacts, goods obtained from geographical distance can in and of themselves constitute very direct, pristine indications of distant contact. Esoteric knowledge derived from foreign places and peoples, generally including knowledge of foreign customs, rituals, songs, languages, and modes of government, is valuable because it, too, is direct and indisputable. As Howe has indicated with respect to the Kuna, among other benefits of foreign education, it is more difficult for local status rivals to

discredit such knowledge by arguing that it has been mislearned (Howe n.d.: 232-233).

PUBLIC SYMBOLS AND CHIEFLY POWER

Considered as a whole, both the tangible and intangible evidence of contact with both vertical and horizontal dimensions of cosmological distance can be combined into powerful public statements sanctifying the legitimacy and evidencing the capabilities of chiefs. Indeed, if Spencer's and Wright's assumptions about the generalized nature of chiefdom hierarchies are valid, acquisition and display of such public symbols may signify a major area of activity in which the regional chief in particular must excel if he is successfully to maintain higher status over local chiefs (see also Lange 1984a: 176).

It further appears that successful acquisition of public symbols of power and authority such as these (but not only these) may be developed somewhat before or ahead of actual secular power. For example, ethnohistorical data indicate that sixteenth-century Panamanian chiefdoms evidenced a higher or more elaborated degree of public status indicators relative to overall political organization. Using the more diversified spectrum of Polynesian chiefdoms as compiled by Sahlins (1958) and Goldman (1970) as a guide, we find that Panamanian chiefdoms approximated more closely the most organizationally complex category (stratified) of Polynesian chiefdoms in terms of a considerable range of elite insignia of rank. These included, for Panama, distinctive headdress, abundance of gold ornaments, distinctive robes, carved and painted regional chiefly houses, carrying litters (hammocks) for regional chiefs, use of chiefly language, and special life-crisis rites for chiefs (burial or above-ground preservation of remains, elaborate grave goods, sacrificed retainers). These same chiefdoms, however, correlated with a more middle range (open) Polynesian organizational and operational format in terms of number and complexity of hierarchical levels (Helms 1979: 17-20). The implication seems to be that attainment of the tangible symbols of power and authority is not just an accompaniment but a useful, perhaps necessary, first step to the actual attainment and implementation of power and authority (cf. Toby 1984; Chaffetz 1981).

The rationale underlying this proposal is that the successful attainment of public symbols by high chiefs is not only indicative of the need to evidence high status tangibly, but also a statement of appropriate personal chiefly capabilities shown both in symbol and in substance in the acquisition and/or production, followed by public display, of exceptional (rare, scarce, unusual), mystical, sacred, or power-filled things and information. Acquisition of wealth of this sort is also fundamental to chiefdom leadership

because it visibly defines the meaning of hierarchy, primarily by making hierarchy appear to be a "natural (cosmological)" or "sacred"—and therefore unquestionable—phenomenon (Kus 1982). The principle of hierarchy, in turn, defines the concept of chief and restricts this position to a select few. Given this restriction, even these select few, as well as others of high rank who are excluded from highest offices, are likely to be highly competitive men of influence, and, as Spencer notes, relative success in acquisition of exceptional material goods may help determine and/or support actual political incumbencies, particularly among regional chiefs who, in a situation of generalized authority, must find some means other than control of local resources to support their claim to superior, supralocal status.

As we have noted, chiefly material goods denoting sacrality and legitimation may be produced by local artisans and/or be acquired from foreign locales, although the actual material goods derived from geographical distance may be considered inherently somewhat more powerful than material goods derived from a more localized setting. It may be easier for a regional chief to restrict or control access to geographical or horizontal distance and its products by his rivals than to restrict or control access to vertical distance and its expression in locally produced public symbols. As corollary, following a suggestion by Maurice Bloch (1974), it may be somewhat easier to express elite rivalry in the arena of horizontal or geographical distance than in the arena of vertical distance.

Bloch (1974: 78) has pointed out that in religious ceremonies per se, such as would be conducted relative to involvement with what I have been calling vertical distance, there are no individual power struggles. Any ritualized event is by definition a highly formalized affair with limited options for innovations or alternative individualistic behaviors. On the contrary, all participants are reaffirmed in their allotted sociopolitical places at least for the duration of the ceremony. This ritual expression of sociopolitical orderliness is also likely to be readily communicated to a broad audience because ceremonies directed to or associated with vertical distance (i.e., religion, as we usually think of it) do not require physical movement from home. In contrast, since association with horizontal realms requires physical travel away from home, such contact may be harder to formalize or ritualize successfully, at least within the local public setting where chiefly activities are judged.³ Long-distance geographical contacts, therefore, may offer greater opportunity for significant competition among contenders for power.⁴

³ Ritual may nonetheless be an important part of actual travel (see Hill 1948; Sahagún 1959, 9: 13–16).

⁴ If such be the case, I would also expect incumbent leaders to attempt to formalize and ritualize long-distance activities as much as possible in an effort to restrain rivals, and rivals to attempt to resist this formalization, with its implications of established order, and to strive

At this point, we must attend once again to the crucial issue of modes of travel or of contact. Geographical travel routes in the physical world are obviously limited by terrain, supplies, and/or the logistics of necessary hospitality en route. Hence, in spite of greater inducements for open competition in long-distance activities, the means to succeed in such competition may be blocked, if not by ritual, then by those who have the good fortune to control crucial logistical positions on major travel routes. It is understandable, then, why chiefly rivalries, such as those indicated in the ethnohistorical data for Panama, are openly expressed "on the ground" in intergroup warfare (see also note 4) and may correlate nicely with relative positions vis-à-vis travel routes. (Elite rivalries over formal religious matters also exist but may be harder to document, particularly for prehistory, and are more likely to be played out in more subtle fashion.)

Finally, the nature of involvement with horizontal distance may be expected to vary according to the complexity of societal organization. As Spencer and Wright have pointed out, states are characterized by more specialized modes of internal governmental organization and operation. They also have somewhat more institutionalized succession mechanisms that may help to reduce elite rivalries; as corollary, evidence of personal capabilities may be less immediately compelling as a qualification for succession to high office (though perhaps still important for successful incumbency). In such a situation, involvement with geographically or supernaturally distant realms may emphasize control over that realm as much or more than acquisition of power from that realm. Kings and emperors may also strive to bring the distant world to themselves rather than to visit the distant world personally. Learned foreign advisors (often scholar-traders) may be resident at kingly courts, increasing the non-kin supporters of the king and applying their esoteric knowledge and learned skills to both sacred and secular kingly affairs. Long-distance agents of the government or the king (such as the *pochteca*) also are used in place of the ruler to contact geographically distant realms, just as agents (priests) are used to contact vertical distance. Finally, the wonders and riches obtainable from geographically distant locales are brought to the center in considerable quantity, and, by the quality or meaning attributed to quantity, evidence a sense of control over, more than simple association with, such power-filled wealth and the cosmologically significant domain it represents.

In other words, states seek to draw the periphery into contact with the cosmological-political center or to expand the center outward, often in very dynamic processes of expansion and retraction (see Tambiah 1977 regarding the "galactic polity"). Chiefdoms, in contrast, do not seek to expand the

instead to maximize their own long-distance contact. It is also possible to view intergroup warfare as a variation on competition for outside power and materials (see Ferrero 1981: 101).

center or control the frontier in this manner, for there is no way, given the simple form of political structuring, effectively to administer more territory.⁵ Instead, given the generalized nature of chiefdom administration and the problem it creates for regional leaders, such leaders must seek to bolster or express the very concept of the regional center, work to create a center, by emphasizing contact with the periphery (or better, with the distant and the foreign) as a source of power to sanctify the authority of regional chiefs and elevate the regional center above local districts.

Some of the ideological power to be found in geographically foreign settings may take the form of more complex political-ideological systems (states) that have evolved "out there" towards which chiefs of chiefdoms may be drawn (either directly or by more indirect elite networking) as founts of esoteric knowledge and of rare and powerful material goods. In corresponding fashion, agents (merchants) of the distant state may seek equally powerful (to them) materials from the more peripheral (to them) chiefly domains. The dynamics inherent in this mutual interaction not only help to define and create chiefly centers and legitimize and elevate regional chiefs, but also may begin to effect structural changes in regional governmental organization and operation (e.g., the "Mesoamericanization" of the Central American territory adjacent to the Mexican and Maya domains and the Incaic impact on north Andean chiefdoms. See Willey 1984: 345-351, 373-374, 367-368; Sharer 1984; Salomon 1986: chap. 6).

There seems to be a geographical limit, however, to how far such influence can spread; how far the derivative chain-model ripples (Bray 1984: 308-309) from such contacts can move before becoming too diluted or energyless to effect significant change. I would concur with the opinion that one significant reason for the failure of Lower Central American chiefdoms to evolve into more complex political structures may well have been the simple fact that (in terms of contemporary means of travel and communication) they stood too far away geographically from the major states of Mesoamerica and the Central Andes to be significantly structurally modified by contacts with those polities, even though bits and pieces of material culture could be avidly sought as long-distance chiefly goods (see Lange 1984a: 191; Lange 1984b: 58). Instead, the dynamics of chiefly outreach and networking had to be conducted among elites of organizationally more or less comparable polities of the Intermediate Area, who strove primarily to develop and elaborate regional chieftainship and to create and maintain chiefly centers but were never able to use long-distance associations effectively as extensions or amplifications of internal control from those centers.

⁵ Spencer notes (1987: 374-375) that for chiefdoms, as evidenced in ancient Panama and elsewhere, the most efficiently administered domain for a single chief would include the territory within a half day's travel from the center.

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