

Indigenous Anarchic Hierarchy

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What is hierarchy outside of the European anarchist cosmology? Hierarchy is something that is often overlooked among Indigenous anarchics, but is essential for understanding social relations in Indigenous cosmologies. These forms of hierarchy are not based in the same relations and need to have broader discussion among Indigenous anarchics as we move forward outside of European political paradigms.

Indigenous Historical & Cultural Understandings of Hierarchy

It is possible to characterize positions of hierarchy within some Indigenous systems as hierarchies based on respect, not domination. People may hold a position as 'chief' in a hierarchy that encourages people to follow their guidance, but there is no mechanism to enforce obedience or observance of these leaders' ideas.

Caribs/Kalinago would never abide an order to go fishing, but at the suggestion that fish was needed by the chief, people would join him in fishing. Among Yuman tribes, chiefs & orators would lead in offering suggestions for activities, but mutual consent was required for action. In another instance of this among a Yuman tribe, the Kwapa war parties could only be successful if the person urging the military action could convince people to join him in combat.

Looking at my people, the Kwapas, we see select forms of respect-based leaders serving in different roles. The most prominent was the chief, who acted as the unitor and coordinator for the entire tribe. It was his responsibility to gather people together for funerals, for deliberations of justice, for trade, and for diplomatic discussions with foreign emissaries. Kwapa chiefs usually came from a family line, but this was not always the case. Patrilineal chiefs arose largely because the son of a chief was expected to learn from his father, to participate in his father's duties, and to prepare to one day lead with wisdom. This usually worked, but in cases where the son wasn't able or willing to provide wise leadership, another person who held the community's respect would take up the mantle. Orators followed a similar tradition to chiefs, passing from father to worthy son or too another man who had the respect & knowledge to fill the role. Orators provided spoken wisdom. Orators would be present in each village, getting on the roof of a home/ramada each day to tell stories that were relevant to social conditions on that given day. They taught ethics, morality, and some aspects of spirituality. Often a respected man without the oral wisdom of an orator would act as a capitan, helping lead the logistics and cooperative labor for a village/clan in daily activities.

Another positions for leadership was only active during times of war. The kwinemi (war chief) was selected by all Kwapa people, men & women, at a general meeting. His selection was based on his oration, his dreams for how to accomplish the war. A previous kwinemi could not appoint a new leader; this was seen as a community decision because it involved the lives of so many families, and might invoke retribution on the entirety of the tribe. Once selected, a kwinemi would lead through the entire battle, unless incapacitated, at which time a new leader would spontaneously arise, usually from the ranks of the experienced warriors. Secondary, were the ñakwil bakas (feathered lance warriors) who had demonstrated great courage and carried with them great experience, who carried only a double pointed feathered lance. The tertiary fighters of less experience would be shield warriors and archers, divided based upon personal preference for weapon and the needs of the campaign.

With these hierarchies, we see that leaders are given preferential ‘authorities’ to suggest actions, but no authority to compel it. This authority hinges on respect, with a person being demoted from their position in the hierarchy, without ceremony, when people lose respect.

Hierarchies within these communities were not solely based on respect; domination-based hierarchy existed, particularly with regard to women, children, and slaves. With respect to the Kwapa, Women were given autonomy over their choice of partner and could leave a non-providing partner at will. Women, however, were historically denied opportunities to lead or to craft an identity independent of a man. All leaders were men and women all had the same name, with specific women being referenced by which mans home she lived in. With the exception of trans men, there was no option in this. This was the first way that hierarchy and domination manifested in Kwapa culture.

Kwapas also took kwabayau (slaves) in battle and would trade them for goods with neighboring tribes. The master-slave relationship in Kwapa society was markedly different than that of western chattel slavery. Kwabayau were often adopted into families and were expected to act as Kwapas. Some, especially those captured in revenge battles, were subject to abuse. Children born to captured Kwabayau were considered free and full members of the tribe and would be treated as such. This was the second way that hierarchy and domination manifested in Kwapa culture.

One culture we can look to too for an almost complete absence of hierarchy is the Hadza people of West Africa. The Hadza have a simple solution to those who feel they have the right to control others. They pack up camp and leave them behind. They do this until the person stops attempting to control them. In Hadza culture everyone is one the same level of a respect based hierarchy, in that a person can only fall from grace, not aspire to it.

Anarchist Historical & Cultural Understandings of Hierarchy

Anarchy & Anarchism take their name from the Greek root anarchos, broken down to its roots-an meaning without and archos meaning ruler. Without-ruler has differing interpretations, the most rigid being the absolute destruction of hierarchy. This has led many Indigenous communities to steer clear of defining themselves under the rigid definition used by some to be anarchism, an ideological dogma that pushes aside material and spiritual realities of our peoples. Rigid and often European centered interpretations of anarchy/anarchism do have variations within them: herein we will briefly explore

For the absolutist position on hierarchy, we can look to a contemporary writing in *Anarchy Vs. Archy: No Justified Authority Or Why Chomsky Is Wrong* by Ziq. The author expresses the position that anarchy is not defined as the absence of rulers, but specifically states that “*Hierarchies exist for rulers to maintain their social control & power over the population. This control is maintained with violent force by authorities appointed by the rulers: the army, national guard, police, courts, prisons, social workers, the media, tax collectors, etc.*” While Ziq makes allowances for services and advisement by specialists, they fail to acknowledge the deference between respect based hierarchies (such as the deference to specialists) and the coercive hierarchies with their machinations to maintain coercive power.

Edwin Hammer analyzed hierarchy as manifest in the role-playing needed to allow hierarchies to exist. They write:

“The role mediates authenticity, preventing the experience of directly lived life. One does not experience any particular generalized activity, one experiences the responsibilities and duties demanded by one’s role in that activity. If at times it appears social life permits individuals to transcend their roles, this is merely the assumption, the animation of another preexisting role, or perhaps even the creation of a new role, but it is not transcendence at all. It is a new context, a replacement into the hierarchically structured enterprises that predominate: a new role, with new, specialized duties, and the power to execute those tasks or ensure their accomplishment.”

Ever shifting roles allow us to delegate of parts of our existence for others to perform or oversee. This analysis of hierarchy strikes more deeply at both respect based and domination based hierarchies as a fragmentation of the self.

Murry Bookchin understood oppressive hierarchy as centralized in domination. He argued against much of the European left’s incorrect analysis that domination-based hierarchy arose from a desire to free ourselves from the ‘domination of nature.’ Indigenous people have long laughed at these assertions by Marx and others. It has always been deeply alienating. Bookchin calls it out with an understanding we can appreciate as Indigenous people:

“However much the writings of liberals and Marx convey the belief that attempts to dominate nature “led” to the domination of human by human, no such “project” ever existed in the annals of what we call “history.” At no time in the history of humanity did the oppressed of any period joyfully accede to their oppression in a starry-eyed belief that their misery would ultimately confer a state of blissful freedom from the “domination of nature” to their descendants in some future era.”

He also wrote,

“Domination of human by human did not arise because people created a socially oppressive “mechanism” — be it Marx’s class structures or Lewis Mumford’s human-constructed “mega-machine” in order to “free” themselves from the “domination by nature.” It is exactly this very queasy idea that gave rise to the myth that the domination of nature “requires,” “presupposes,” or “involves” the domination of human by human.”

Bookchin generalizes some of the conceptions of hierarchy and property in Indigenous societies, but does note that outside of European or similarly feudal societies globally, Indigenous people generally did conceive of nature literally permeating “the community not only as a providential environment, but as the blood flow of the kinship tie that united human to human and generation to generation.” The connection to land & nature often coexists with respect-based hierarchies but also can exist in domination-based hierarchies.

Western Academics’ Understandings of Hierarchy

Western academics have noted the difference between hierarchies and have attempted to test and quantify. They state that certain hierarchies are based in domination are inherently based

in 'rule,' the ability to enact domination to ensure compliance. This social structure, also seen in some Indigenous systems, is a hierarchy that relies not on mutual consent/respect, but on domination /competition.

Dominance and Prestige are used in some psychological literature to explain the differences between these already extant Indigenous systems (Cheng et al, 2012). These have been competing models for how hierarchies are established and maintained. Similar language can be seen with "selfish or servant" leadership where selfish leaders act to empower themselves and allies at the cost of the greater community (Gillet et al, 2011). Servant leaders are seen to act out of empathy and a sense of duty to the community, often taking a broader perspective than just those of the narrowly interested parties. As Cheng discussed, these both can exist within the same systems, something that we as anarchic Indigenous people are eager to change, expelling dominance-based leadership and hierarchy mobilities and building systems that rely on respect (academically known as prestige or servant hierarchies).

A Vision for Indigenous Anarchic Hierarchy & De-Hierarchy Moving Forward

We as anarchic Indigenous people, oppose domination-based hierarchy, rejecting it entirely as self-serving and to the detriment of everyone in the community. Mutual consent & respect are essential. Domination must never be used against others in our communities to enact compliance. Indigenous systems, like those seen in the Mayan communities who have helped build the governance systems of the Zapatistas, provide a way forward, safeguarding against domination.

We must drive out domination-based hierarchies. Who is a man to coerce a woman to do anything? Abolish Patriarchy. Who is a woman to coerce a woman to do anything? Abolish domination. Who is a light skinned person to coerce a dark skin person to do anything? Abolish anti-Blackness and colorism. Some of these things are deeply rooted in parts of our cultures. It may be painful for some to see these changes, but we must act towards equity within our Indigenous societies if we are ever to escape the workings of self-centered rulers. Free from internal domination, we can finally unite in an effective fight against colonial domination and capitalist domination.

Indigenous people can find strength in our spirituality. We must discover our spirituality for ourselves and remember that colonizers have tainted some of our spiritual practices. Equally, some of our spiritual practices may have been developed as a means of enforcing domination-based hierarchies. With open eyes and loving hearts, we can lay these truths bare, building from what we find, spiritualities that are true to our ancestors and true to the generations that shall come.

We can find strength in respect, mutual cooperation, and leadership from those who hold no coercive power. We must be equally ready to build systems in our societies to root out self-serving people who use acts of domination to achieve their goals. No matter the goals of the community, domination is not to be used as a tool used to plant revolution by so-called Indigenous revolutionary leaders. That is a dangerous path that which wash away with the first hard rains, into authoritarianism.

Indigenous anarchic futures are ours to create. They will be different, without a doubt, from Indigenous society to Indigenous society; our cultures, both as they are and as they will be, reflect

our lands, our experiences, our struggles, and how we wish to shape our existences in the future. All colonized people have lost so much, but with what we have left, we can start anew. We can learn from each other, we can share, we can build new networks of relations and trade to replace those that were destroyed. Without centralization we can unite in material and intellectual solidarity. With the wisdom of our ancestors and living kin today, Africa, Americas, Australia, Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Arctic, and Asia can unite in cooperative, decentralized struggle. What hierarchies provide us with benefits? How have other people lived without domination? Look around the world; Indigenous people have answers.

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