

The amazonian tribe
of kayapo offers a
view on political
systems in a small
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Introduction

Communities are organized in various ways to ensure peaceful coexistence and fair distribution of resources within the society. Sometimes political and social systems are loosely coordinated while in some communities, the political and systems of social control are formally organized with clear leadership structures and social stratification systems (Bonvillain 2012: 77). In these relatively organized communities, there are conventional norms and values that all members of the society must adhere to. In case of deviant behavior, the systems of punishment are availed within the social control and leadership structures to ensure bad behavior does not prevail within the society (Colson 1986: 11). Kayapo is a small tribal society of around 7000 members. Kayapo occupies the land next to the Amazon rain forests in Brazil and practice shifting cultivation for food. The community also uses the forest as a source of medicinal products and also as a sacred place. Based on the political and social organization of Kayapo, this paper evaluates political systems and systems of social control within a tribal society.

Discussion

Kayapo is politically organized in the form of a tribe. According to Oberschall (2015: 54), tribe refers to the political organization of non-industrialized societies which usually consists of smaller kins or non-kin groups which are linked by a common cultural aspect. With a total population of just over 7000 people, Kayapo consists of subgroups such as Xikrin, Gerotire, Mekranoti and Metyktire. These subgroups are culturally linked with a common language, the Kayapo language. The Kayapo people also speak Portuguese. However,

their level of Portuguese-speaking depends on the history of contact of the individual groups with the outsiders (Traditions Customs 2017). The Kayapo people depend on the Amazon rainforests for food, water, and medicinal products. In this regard, they regard these rainforests to be sacred places that ought to be protected. Elsewhere, Kayapo are also subsistence farmers. They practice the sustainable slash and burn agriculture where they leave the land after harvesting and move to a new place where they can start all over again.

The family is the basic unit of the social organization of the Kayapo people. Among the Kayapo people, extended families live together in a single village. The village comprises of many huts with one in the middle of the village. The hut in the middle of the village signifies that the entire village originates from a single man (Traditions Customs 2017). Secondly, Kayapo is a patriarchal society where men only discussed important issues to the society. The house at the middle of the village, therefore, serves as a place where men could meet to discuss some important issues about the society and come up with solutions. Women are usually not allowed to enter the house in the middle of the village. Some of the Kayapo villages include Gerotire and Kapot.

Just like most of the tribes, Kayapo has a political administration system headed by a chief. The chief has the power over the entire community. The chief is supported by elders in the administration of their various duties. Since Kayapo practices communal economic and social approaches, the elders' walks around the village to inform people of the day's tasks such as

fishing, hunting and ritual dances. Elders are highly respected, and when they speak, people must gather and listen carefully. In addition, the elders are tasked with the motivation of the people to work together in harmony and ensure cohesion within the village (Traditions Customs 2017). Though families are allowed to have a private property such as home, field, and tools, everything must be shared for the common good of the village. This is to ensure that nobody starves. Foodstuffs such as fish caught and fruits gathered must be shared equally among members of the society.

The chief (sometimes referred to as an indigenous leader) is the political leader among various subgroups of the Kayapo tribe. The main role of the chief is to solve problems and conflicts that can arise within the society. However, the chief uses a participatory approach to solving various conflicts. The chief calls a gathering of elders where the problem is discussed, and solutions suggested and implemented (Traditions Customs 2017). For example, among the Kayapo people, a person that talks bad about others should be reprimanded and punished by the chief and elders. The Chiefs are also tasked with overseeing redistribution of wealth among the people. For instance, among the people of Gerotire village, the chief ensures that incomes from the gold mined in the region benefits all the members of the village. As a result, the village has become relatively wealthy compared to other villages (Traditions Customs 2017).

Elsewhere, Kayapo's political system is organized in the form of pantribal associations. Pantribal associations refer to the organization of the society in terms of factors such as age sets and gender (Bonvillain 2012: 79). The most

powerful pantribal association is the group of elders as highlighted earlier in the text. This association is headed by the chief and consists of one elder picked from every family or village. The main goal of this group of elders is to ensure that there is a sense of unity and harmony within the society. The elders also perform leadership roles within the society. These powers are usually bestowed on the elders due to the senior status within the society (Colson 1986: 8). In this regard, age is an important determinant of authority and power among Kayapo people. Furthermore, elders have the power to mobilize people to voice their opinions about certain issues. Whereas the modern political systems are well organized and have a central leadership, the Kayapo leadership is based on kinship ties with different leadership structures responsible for controlling their tribal boundaries from intruders and external attacks. To form a formidable force, Kayapo have always depended on alliances and support in order for them to be strong and able to fend for themselves and to accumulate wealth. What's more, the tribe believes in violence for a purpose.

In 1987, Kayapo elders' organized massive demonstrations against the government's plans to construct a hydroelectric dam in the Xingu River area, namely the Belo Monte Dam. Construction of this dam would result in the displacement of the Kayapo people. Under the leadership of Elder Paulinho Paiakan, the Kayapo gathered at the planned site of the dam at Altamira, Para for several days vowing not to leave until their demands were met (Zanotti and Chernella 2008: 507). Along with other Brazilian Indians, the Kayapo demanded that the government makes available the information they were withholding about the negative consequences of the dam.

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Wielding weapons and performing traditional war oratory and dances, Kayapo forced the government and the World Bank to reconsider the projects (Zanotti and Chernella 2008: 507).

Like most tribal societies, the Kayapo people were egalitarian. That is, among the Kayapo, there was no one individual, family or residential group which was economically superior to others. All families within the tribe including those of the elders were treated equally in the distribution of food and other products (Zanotti and Chernella 2008: 500). Kayapo people do not have special privileges to their leaders in terms of material benefits. The principle of equality within the tribe helps to ensure that there is self-sufficiency within the community in terms of food and other basic commodities. Nevertheless, the social fabric of the Kayapo has so far been considerably influenced due to their interaction with other larger communities. Despite the influence from outsiders, the Kayapo people have managed to maintain their traditional political systems (Traditions Customs 2017).

Kayapo people have an informal system of social control. According to Colson (1986: 8), an informal system of social control refers to internalization of norms and values in the process of socialization. In this system, these norms and values are used to determine and regulate the behavior of individuals. Furthermore, the system ensures that actions of the members of the society are confined to a narrower range of social expectations and group standards (Colson 1986: 10, Janowitz 1975: 100). On the other hand, Kayapo people also have certain beliefs that guide their interactions and

inform the role of various members of the society and also their special relationship with the natural environment. For example, Kayapo people believe that their ancestors learned their social skills from the insects thus their mothers paint their bodies with the images of various insects. By painting the bodies in insect images, Kayapo mothers believe they can be able to communicate with the spirits of the forests and rivers (Traditionscustoms. com 2017). Lastly, uncles, aunts, godparents and grandparents are tasked with teaching the children regarding the norms and values of the community.

Conclusion

This paper sought to explore the political system and the system of social control among the Kayapo people of Brazil. According to the analysis, Kayapo are politically organized based on the tribe. The tribal political organization consists of the villages which are headed by the elders. From every village, an elder is selected to participate in decision-making and conflict resolution processes within the society. The community received their supplies from the rain forest along with shifting agriculture which ensured that they were relatively self-sufficient. Furthermore, Kayapo was found to be egalitarian in nature. That is, all members of the community are considered equal while they use the values of the community to exert social control among its members. Lastly, the community had a system of beliefs such as the sacred value of insects.