Decision Making in a Samoan Village

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans les études anthropologiques sur le leadership, la structuration du pouvoir, le processus de faction, l'efficacité et la solidité des groupes, il serait bon de faire plus souvent usage des méthodes mises au point par les recherches sur les interactions en petit groupe. C'est dans cette perspective que l'auteur analyse les procédures politiques du conseil du village de Fitiuta, Samoa américaine.

A partir de quelques généralisations découlant du processus de décision à l'intérieur de petits groupes culturels nord-américains, l'auteur scrute les rôles des chefs et des "Talking Chiefs" dans les délibérations du conseil, dans la votation et dans le protocol entourant les chefs.

Anthropology has never shown itself to be particularly shy about borrowing and adapting methods and concepts from other behavioral sciences and should not now overlook the contributions of sociology, social psychology, education and even business administration in an area of investigation which has been labelled group dynamics or small group interaction research. A few anthropologists such as Eliot Chapple, Douglas Oliver, and Conrad Arensberg have been associated with this kind of approach but there should be a greater awareness in anthropology of the possibilities offered by small group dynamics research in collecting more comprehensive and more comparable data of the social interaction within political groups in primitive societies.

The behavior of tribal or village councils is, for example, an excellent subject for study by group dynamics methods. Procedures followed by such groups in the making of decisions or the settling of issues are not greatly different from the kind of behavior which Robert Bales has so carefully charted in his analysis of American business conferences. Granted that in particular socie-

ties patterns of interaction may be so unique that Bales' interaction process analysis criteria cannot easily be applied but his general method represents a fresh avenue of approach in the study of such phenomena as leadership, power structure, factionalism, group efficiency and solidarity.

In some societies one may encounter the phenomenon of the status or ascribed leader who rules by traditional right whereas another may involve leadership of the emergent type where the individual rules solely by virtue of his ability and personality. In each case the behavior of the leader and the expectations of the led vary and make for different kinds of social situations. Each of these possibilities has been studied in small group interaction research in European culture and thus there are established types or models of behavior against which one may measure the behavior of groups in non-Western cultures. Differences growing out of the various cultural configurations will undoubtedly be discovered but it is assumed that there will be numerous common denominators of behavior in groups in many parts of the world.

The present paper is an attempt to analyze the procedures of the village council in Fitiuta, American Samoa in terms of certain generalizations which have been established as being operative in small decision-making bodies in our own culture. I will attempt to point out differences and similarities which obtain in the two situations. The collection of data for this analysis took place in 1962-3 and to a certain extent was oriented by the demands of data collection in group dynamics research. Specifically there was an attempt to record the relationship of speakers, the sequence, content and tone of speeches and the behind-the-scenes manipulations which resulted in particular decisions.

The council in a Samoan village is composed of chiefs of various ranks who have been elected by their extended family units to serve as family head, administer family affairs and represent them in the village council wherein decisions are made concerning political, social, and religious matters affecting the village as a whole. These chiefs are chosen on the basis of general intelligence, knowledge of Samoan institutions, service to the family and today, on the basis of amount of formal education and knowledge of the Western world. As the elected head of an

extended family a man assumes the traditional family title which may be of chief or talking chief designation. Titles are of various levels of importance and the position of a particular title in the village hierarchy is to a great extent dependent upon mythological or legendary traditions. A chief title of paramount rank may be so recognized because its original holder is reported to have been a direct descendant of the Tagaloa family of gods. A very high talking chief title may derive its status from the fact that its original holder had the title conferred upon him by a king for exceptional valor in time of war. It is possible to point to three general levels of chief titles and an equal number of levels of talking chief titles. Some of the lower titles are actually secondary ones in large and important families and their holders are therefore automatically overshadowed by the senior title in their family.

We have in Samoan culture what small group researchers refer to as a status leader situation where certain members of the council might, by virtue of their traditional rank, be expected to play a more important role in the decision-making processes and in the leadership picture than others. While traditional rank is respected it is only one element of many which must be considered in understanding how village council decisions are made. The voices of men holding high titles will in certain circumstances carry more weight than those of the lower titles, but all ranks are given full opportunity to bring their opinions to the attention of the assembled chiefs. The main advantage in holding a high title is that it may mean that the individual will serve as the presiding officer in a discussion and in the case of high ranking talking chiefs there is a better opportunity of being in a position to place a particular proposition before the assembly and while doing so comment on its ramifications.

While status leadership is something which the investigator must take into consideration, the participants themselves think of the decision making process more in terms of a group function. That is to say, that village leadership is thought of as resting primarily with the group rather than with the status leader. It is impossible for any high ranking individual to make a demand upon the village without first discussing the matter with the village

council and obtaining their permission. In one very well known case, a village council objected to the autocratic behavior of their high chief and sent a runner to all the surrounding villages and informed their councils that they no longer recognized the title of their paramount chief and had named another chief as their highest officer. When the officially deposed chief arrived at the next council meeting he found that his post was occupied and he had no alternative but to return home. The members of his extended family upon hearing of the council action threatened to remove his title, since they no longer had representation in the village council. To prevent this action the chief had to return to the council and ceremonially ask their forgiveness by prostrating himself outside the council house with a finemat over his head until the council reinstated him to his official position.

In order to clarify the nature of group participation in Samoan decision-making and to illuminate the Samoan concepts of leadership let us examine Samoan village council procedures in terms of a set of principles which have been established as being essential to group efficiency and solidarity in our culture.

The *Handbook for Group Development* written by Ronald Levy and Rhea Osten and published by Socionomic Research Associates of Chicago (1950) lists the following requirements which must be present if maximum efficiency and satisfaction is to be achieved by the group in its making of decisions:

1) group decisions should be made by all members of a group working together so that all the ideas, feelings, and reactions of the individuals may be presented.

2) all decisions should represent as near a unanimous agreement as possible but when unanimity is not possible full opportunity for expression should be given to the minority.

3) the most effective decisions are made after a period of active discussion or dramatization in which group members share their feelings and reactions.

4) decisions should never be inexorable. The same process which made them should be allowed to modify them when the need arises.

5) group decision should be felt to be group products. This main-
tains a feeling of unity and identification with the group.

One of the most important decisions made in the village of
Fitiuta, American Samoa, where I worked in 1963 was whether
or not an American educational television producer should be
permitted to photograph the somewhat secret and sacred *fono
faleula tau aitu* (meeting of the house of spirits). This traditional
meeting with its elaborate kava ceremony has always been a
highly guarded phenomenon. Now there was the question of
whether to allow the rest of the world to share the experience of
the meeting and thus get better insight into the traditional Samoan
way of life. The fact that the form of the meeting would be
recorded on film for future generations of Samoans was also a
consideration. This kind of question was certainly not typical of
those discussed in the normal village council meeting but it un-
doubtedly was considered the most crucial decision the village
had to make during my sojourn in the islands. Before the details
of the council deliberation are enumerated it will be helpful to
know something of the composition of the Fitiuta village council.
Although there are roughly 75 titled men in this council there are
16 high titles. Four high chiefs are collectively known as the
faleifa (four houses) and four high chiefs make up the *maopu*.
Eight high talking chief titles are equally distributed in the
to'oto'o (speakers) and *suafanu'u* (rulers of the village) groups.

The need for a meeting was expressed to other orator chiefs
by High Talking Chief La'apui who had been approached by the
educational television man. La'apui and the other orators are
known to have discussed the problem informally at this time but
there is no evidence that they arrived at any decision as to what
the village position should be. An informal discussion such as
this which precedes a formal council meeting is known as a
taupulega. Keesing (1956) characterizes such a discussion as a
kind of caucus wherein decisions are arrived at before the formal
council discussions begin. My own observations and analysis of
fono action, however, lead me to believe that these informal dis-
cussions do not settle questions but are a means of exploring issues
and assessing support for, or opposition to, the matter to be
debated. Samoan chiefs are wary of going out on a limb unless

they can count on some support from other chiefs. Thus it is my opinion that Samoan deliberations meet the requirement stated earlier that decisions should be made by all the members of a group working together.

The talking chiefs are responsible for passing the word and assembling the titled heads of families which make up the council and this they did. The convened council was presided over by *To'oto'o* La'apui and it was he who stated the issue to be decided. This might ordinarily have been the duty of the paramount chief but he was not living in the village at that time because he was employed by the government on the island of Tutuila.

The initial speech was made by a high chief of the *maopu* group of titled men. It was non-commital and expository in nature and represented an attempt to clarify the issue without taking a definite stand. The participants of the *fono* interpreted the speech as one designed to feel out public opinion on the matter and thus apparently corroborated my impression that no pre-*fono* decision had been made.

The second speech was one by a talking chief of low rank speaking for his high chief, a *faleifa* member. The speech was much like the one which preceded it. It further clarified the issue and enumerated both pros and cons. The speech contributed little but represented an opportunity for a young chief to display his wisdom and oratorical abilities.

This oration was followed by that of a low ranking talking chief of the family of Ve'e, a high talking chief of the *suafanu'u* group of orators. He was not speaking for the senior chief of his family but was expressing his own opinion. That opinion was that the procedures of the sacred *fono* should remain the village's cherished secret. This stand was seconded by another lesser rank-ing talking chief of the family of the presiding officer of the *fono*. His position was contrary to that of his senior chief although the latter did not state his views in this meeting. Again we have indication that no cut and dried prior decision is involved, for had consultation taken place between the chiefs of this family the lesser ranking chief would have felt that he should support the senior chief's opinion.

High Chief Ale of the *maopu* spoke next, expressing the view that it was time that the outside world learned of their customs, and Ve'e, a high talking chief of the *suafanu'u* division, agreed with Ale's position. High Chief Nunu, a *maopu,* then spoke in favor of the photography project as did Paopao of the same group of high chiefs. Thus the position of the village elite was known. Opposing them had been only two lesser ranking talking chiefs. The presiding High Talking Chief La'apui sensing that the majority opinion had been established and hearing no further statements of opposition, stated that the village had decided to allow the American to photograph their age-old *fono* institutions.

The decision, considered by the chiefs to be a unanimous one, had been made. Had further opposition developed following the speeches of the high ranks, then there would have been an attempt to reach a compromise resolution, but in this case the opposition disappeared when the majority opinion was apparent. The Samoan majority is not calculated in numerical terms, for the opinions of higher titles carry more weight than the lower ones. Four chiefs of high rank voting together would represent a majority opinion over six opposing chiefs of low rank. Every chief, however, has the opportunity of expressing his views and theoretically the chance to convince the high chiefs of the wisdom of his position. Keesing (1956:134-5) quotes a "part Samoan leader" as claiming "The Samoans have formalities. No one is to express himself freely at meetings. They have their high chiefs and orators, and although a lesser chief's opinion might differ on the subject at issue, he usually will not dare to express it in their presence."

This opinion, which Keesing also appears to reject, is not supported by any evidence which I was able to collect. Lesser ranking chiefs have a perfect right to express opinions which differ from those of high elite rank but they must observe proper formalities. For example, a common preface to a speech which opposes a stated opinion of a man of high rank may be translated "The worthless bird flies over the *tia*". The *tia* was the platform used in the chiefly sport of pigeon netting. This statement carries the idea that "all due respect is given to the men of high rank but kindly listen to this dissenting opinion."

The third principle stated as a requisite of effective group decision making was that decisions should be reached only after a period of active discussion or dramatization in which group members may share their feelings and ideas. One or two peculiarities must be pointed out concerning group discussions as they are found in the Samoan setting. First of all, the length of time involved in making decisions in the Samoan council meetings has been repeatedly commented upon by missionaries and government administrators who become bored with the many flowery speeches made in deciding the simplest and most unimportant of issues. They point out that the speakers often say exactly the same things as those preceding them and that entirely too much time is spent in deliberation. Turner (1861) describes a village meeting where half a day was consumed by only two speeches. These observations are quite correct but there are valid reasons for the repetition and the great consumption of time.

Speeches in the council meeting represent votes, since hand counts are not taken, and the presiding chief must assess the desire of the assembly solely from the oral pronouncements of its members. Therefore, speeches of the high chiefs are often very similar if they hold the same opinion. Lesser chiefs usually will not speak if the opinions correspond to their own, for silence is interpreted as approval of the general point of view which is dominating the discussion.

It should also be pointed out that speeches are often long because the Samoan believes that the more important the issue the longer it should be deliberated. The business-like behavior of European administrators in keeping appointments short, to the point and on a definite time schedule has long been a source of bewilderment, embarrassment and frustration to the Samoan chiefs who still solve problems in the traditional manner.

The Fitiuta village decision described in this paper was one in which no future reversal of policy was possible. Once the films were taken the ceremonial secrecy could no longer be maintained. In other decisions, however, reversals of opinion are possible if the dissenters can marshal sufficient support, for Samoans believe with group dynamics theorists that for proper group efficiency and solidarity, decisions should never be inexorable.

We find, however, that the matter of rank is involved here as it was in the concept of the majority. Keesing points out that "dissension and opposition in elite groups can be most effectively brought into the open where participants are peers or near peers; marked hierarchical differences tend to inhibit them. Opposition by subordinates to opinions and decisions of important elite superiors tend to assume a private or even covert character" (1956:121). In most decisions there is a genuine attempt to arrive at a solution which will be agreeable to all council members regardless of rank, but there are times when this is not possible. Usually the dissenters are few in number but if the opposition gains strength and, most important, if they have a strong elite voice supporting them, the village council will be forced to re-examine and possibly reverse the original decision.

Finally we might point out that Samoan group decision procedures *do* tend to result in resolutions which are felt to be group products. This is stressed by Keesing who points out that "Elite [chiefs'] decision making tends to involve a measure of anonymity for the participants, i.e. an institutionalization of responsibility rather than personal acts" (1956:140).

While village council meetings appear to be dominated by the high ranks it cannot be said that the decisions are those of the high ranks alone. Just as the chairman of a board of directors is theoretically not solely responsible for a board's decisions, neither is the high chief who pronounces the will of his council ever held personally accountable for a council decision. It is this concept of decision making which makes for council and village solidarity and creates an effective legal and norm system. Laws are more easily enforced when all council members believe that they have had an active part in formulating them. It is only in the urban areas of American Samoa where there are government laws enforced by a government police force that serious breaches in law are prevalent. In the traditional system chiefs of all ranks feel that they have a voice in the establishment of laws and norms and therefore they also have the responsibility of following and upholding the products of their creation.

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