CHAPTER 4

THE AFRICAN CHIEF

A nation without a culture has no soul. We are the custodians of our culture.

—Nana Kwame Nyi XII, Paramount Chief of the Assin Apimanim ethnic group of the central Ghana and also president of the Central Region’s House of Chiefs (July 1990).

A. THE SELECTION OF THE CHIEF

In the chiefdoms, or states, rules for selection of chiefs varied from one ethnic group to another. Chieftaincy, in most tribal systems, was hereditary and reserved to certain lineages by right of genealogical link to the founding ancestors. Founding ancestors are member of the family that first settled or founded the settlement. In the Akan political communities of Ghana, these clans or lineages (mmusua or mmusua kuw) numbered eight in Ashanti and seven in Fante.¹

The “ancestral” lineages chose the chief but succession was not always automatic. The chief must hail from the royal clan (the “ancestral” lineages). A person outside this royal clan is ineligible to be chief. But within the royal clan, several may be eligible, giving rise to competition and therefore room for choice. Since this competition can spark a palace feud, “The Tallensi (of Ghana) normally resolved the competitive struggle by rotating the position among the heads of those lineages” (Arhin 1985, 28). For the Akan of Ghana, the chief must be handsome, intelligent, wise, and bodily whole. Any physical deformity—a lost finger or even circumcision—is a disqualification.

While alive, the chief may appoint a vice or heir apparent with the advice and consent of the Queen-Mother and the council. In the Akan systems, the heir apparent was known as abadiakyire. The chief may choose not to appoint one, or, if he did appoint one, he might leave the village or die before the chief himself.

¹ In Ashanti, these were Aduana, Agona, Asona, Asinie, Asokore, Beretuo, Ekuona, and Oyoko. In Fante, they were Nsona/Dwimina, Annona/Yóko/Aguna/Eguana, Twidan/Eburotow, Kwonna/Ebiradzi/Odumnna, Aburadzi/Eduana/Ofurna/Egyira, Ntwa/Abadzi, Adwinadzi/Aowin (Arhin 1985, 29).
In these cases, the choice of the heir would be left to a Queen-Mother subject to approval by the “royal” lineage members.

Most often, the chief’s eldest son would be nominated but could be blocked from succession if he was found to be unfit or mentally incompetent to govern. Other considerations taken into account included how he comported himself in the past, his mannerisms, capacity to lead, valor, and his popularity.2

In some tribes, where such a royal lineage did not exist, different lineages offered candidates for the position. A group of elders would then choose the chief from a number of contestants or rotate chieftaincy among the lineages. If none of these prove satisfactory, a stranger—even a white man—may be selected as a chief. Such was the case of an Englishman, Jimmy Maxen, who was chosen odikro (village chief) in 1968 and named Nana Onyaisi of Aburi in Ghana.3 In how many “civilized” Western societies were blacks or foreigners allowed such political participation, let alone selected as a “chief”?

In general, the chief was never elected by balloting. He was appointed and did not appoint himself—a fundamental difference modern African heads of state should be aware of. However, there were cases where the office was usurped or acquired by chicanery, subterfuge, or force. Such usurpations inevitably led to schisms in the royal lineage and subsequently to internecine strife, break-ups of

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2 Botswana had its first female chief in 2004:

Mosadi Seboko’s father was chief of the Baletes, one of the eight major tribes of Botswana, who settled in this region just south of the nation’s capital, Gaborone, more than a century ago. In the Balete royal family, it is a given that the chief’s firstborn child will be a boy so that he can inherit the throne.

After her father died in 1966, Ms. Seboko’s uncle became chief. Her only brother succeeded him in 1996. When he died in 2001, her father’s relatives put forward a male cousin of Ms. Seboko as his successor, saying that according to custom, only males could rule. But Ms. Seboko, backed by her mother and seven sisters, insisted to the tribal elders that the touchstone was not custom, but the 38-year-old Constitution of Botswana, with its guarantee of freedom from discrimination. Botswana’s women’s rights leaders urged her forward, saying that women must grasp power, not wait for it to be handed to them.

Seboko is now the leader of the Baletes herself, the first female paramount chief ever in Botswana. She was enthroned 15 months ago after challenging and overcoming her own family’s efforts to keep the chiefdom a patriarchy. Ms. Seboko’s 33,000 subjects here in Botswana’s sun-baked southeast corner clearly were a bit perplexed by the prospect of a female ruler. Since then, however, she has endeared herself to much of the tribe by balancing calls for change with respect for tradition (The New York Times, Dec. 11, 2004, A4).

3 He was interviewed on the American television program “Sixty Minutes” (CBS) on May 2, 1993. Asked if his race was a problem, he replied: “Color or race is not important to the Ghanaians, which is their greatest trait. They are color-blind. I am accepted as one of the community.” He also listed some of the rules he could not break as a chief: “A chief cannot fall from his palanquin and remain chief,” “A chief cannot touch the ground with his bare feet,” and “When the chief is taking his bath, he must place his feet on elephant tusks.”