Chiefdoms constitute a political organization characterized by social hierarchies and consolidation of political power into fulltime specialists who control production and distribution of resources. Sometimes the prestige of the leader and their family is higher, but not always. The leader, or chief, was a bit like a big man on steroids; they were reliant on their persuasive skills, but had more control over resources. Chiefs were often spiritual leaders, which helped to demonstrate their right to lead. They were responsible for settling disputes among their constituents, but could not always enforce their decisions. Successive leadership usually fell within a family line, something that contributed to the development of a hierarchical society; however, leadership was not guaranteed. Chiefs had to continually demonstrate their ability to lead. Competition for leadership could be fierce. Warfare was frequent, the nature of which changed; economic gain was a primary motive.

All chiefdoms that have been anthropologically identified were based on horticulture or intensive agriculture with one notable exception. In the Pacific Northwest of North America, chiefdoms emerged based on foraging. This was possible because the rich environment was able to produce a surplus. Having a surplus of food in particular allowed leaders to have enough goods to redistribute and accumulate in order to maintain power. Members of the chiefdom were required to handover part of their harvest to the leader (or chief/king) or their appointed representatives. The chief was expected to redistribute some of this “tax” back to the people through gifting and feasting. Prestige within the chiefdom lay in the amount people were able to give to the chief and in the amount the chief gave back to individuals or families. This differential access, or unequal access to resources, prestige, and power, is a hallmark of a stratified society. In some groups, it was impossible to move out of one social strata and into another.

Membership in the chiefdom was primarily kin-based, but the group could be significantly larger than a tribe. Chiefdoms incorporated multiple hamlets, villages, and possibly small cities into one political unit. Occupational specialization, where people have different jobs within the society and are reliant on others for some of the goods they consume, becomes prevalent within chiefdoms. Within this cultural environment, people began to have a sense of belonging to
entities beyond their kin group, their occupation being one of their identities.

Examples of chiefdoms include the Trobriand and Tongan Islanders in the Pacific, the Maori of New Zealand, the ancient Olmec of Mexico (only known archaeologically), the Natchez of the Mississippi Valley, the Kwakwaka’wakw of British Columbia, and the Zulu and Ashanti in Africa.

Figure 1 - The Ashanti, Ghana (The National Archives UK)

The Ashanti are one of several Akan groups in southern and central Ghana and the Ivory Coast. In the eighteenth-century, the Ashanti formed a confederacy of several Akan groups. Over the following century, the Ashanti expanded their territory through conquest, providing a larger economic base for the chief or Omanhene. After decades of conflict with the British colonial power, in 1901 the British prevailed and the Ashanti leaders were exiled.

The basic settlement pattern of the Ashanti chiefdom was a series of villages and towns centered on the palace of a chief. Kin groups inhabited the villages. Agriculture based on yam, guinea corn, manioc, and maize formed the backbone of subsistence. Pre-British takeover, slave and servants comprised farm labor. After, hired laborers and sharecropping are the norm. Craft specialization was an important part of the Ashanti economy. Weaving, woodcarving, ceramics, and metallurgy were the primary occupations. While women and men shared in the farming work, women were only allowed to specialize in pottery making; all of the other craft specialization was the purview of men. The Ashanti engaged in trade with neighboring societies with gold and slaves forming the commercial basis of the traditional trade economy (Gilbert et al n.d.).

Clans held ownership of land. It was inherited along matrilines. If a clan failed to work the land, ownership would resort to the chiefdom itself. While all Ashanti recognize matrilineal descent, power is restricted to men. The mother’s line determines to which clan an individual belongs, while paternity determines membership in other groups such as spirit. Membership in the various categories includes obligations to observe certain rituals and taboos. The Ashanti believe that an individual’s personality is influenced by membership in the various groups.

The Omanhene always came from “kingly lineages.” Officials, including the matriarchs of the clans, elected the Omanhene. This individual was chosen based on his personal qualities such as personality and competency. Once selected the individual was “enstooled,” which refers to the act of being seated upon the stool that symbolized kingship.
The new king takes on the identity of the previous ruler, forsaking his previous identity. He becomes a sacred person and cannot eat, drink, speak, or be spoken to publically. Communication takes place through the Okyeame, or linguist. The king never steps barefoot on the earth and is covered with an umbrella when he ventures outside. While the power of modern Ashanti kings has eroded, in the past, they had the power of life and death over their constituents.

References