

## Succession to High Office in Pre-Columbian Circum-Caribbean Chiefdoms.

By: Mary W. Helms

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### **Abstract:**

Comparison and analysis of rules for succession to high office in the pre-Columbian chiefdoms of the circum-Caribbean, as reported in the early sixteenth century, suggest preference for 'determinate' modes of succession. Determinate succession modes, in turn, are seen as appropriate to other political and symbolic aspects of these circum-Caribbean polities.

**Keywords:** pre-columbian societies | circum-Caribbean | 16<sup>th</sup> century | succession | politics | chiefdoms | anthropology

### **Article:**

In the early years of the sixteenth century, following the discovery of the Greater Antilles by Christopher Columbus, these islands and the rim of Terra Firma bordering on the south side of the Caribbean Sea were explored by a series of European expeditions. In the course of these so-called Andalusian Voyages, and subsequent explorations, the conquistadors encountered various rank societies or chiefdoms in the Greater Antilles, along the north coast of Venezuela, in northern Colombia, and in Panama (Sauer 1966; Vigneras 1976). Unfortunately, few of these indigenous societies survived the destruction wrought during the first few decades of European contact. Yet some record of their customs and institutions has been preserved, both in the accounts of the major chroniclers of the Conquest and in the memoirs of lesser soldiers and adventurers. From these records it is partially possible to reconstruct the structure and functioning of the circum-Caribbean polities at the time of initial European contact.

This article is concerned with the rules for succession to high office in the chiefdoms of Panama, portions of northern Colombia and the Greater Antilles as reported for the early sixteenth century by various European observers. These polities have received relatively little sustained attention from ethnologists and ethnohistorians, although they stand between the so-called high culture areas of Mesoamerica and the Central Andes and constitute the 'focal region' for Tropical

American chiefdoms (Schwering 1973: 9). Although data are incomplete, many of the rules for succession to high office in these chiefdoms appear to be 'determinate', at least under 'ideal' conditions. Determinate arrangements, in which the successor to the incumbent is automatically predetermined, are said to be relatively uncommon in systems of hereditary succession, while indeterminate succession, in which the successor is not pre-selected but must be chosen by some means at the time of transition, is more frequent (Goody 1966: 25 and *passim*.) In his seminal essay, Goody (1966) has discussed the benefits and costs of both types of systems. Broadly speaking, indeterminate succession arrangements may allow for a stronger or safer position for the incumbent at the expense of greater conflict during the interregnum when a successor must be chosen. Determinate modes of succession, in contrast, create greater strain during periods of incumbency but reduce conflict at the time of succession. As we shall see, it is not likely that the determinacy seemingly indicated in the conquistador's statements regarding rules for succession to chiefly office in circum-Caribbean polities was always realised. Yet the rules are instructive for the insights they may offer into political processes operative in these pre-Columbian chiefdoms.

Information is presented for societies in Panama and the Cauca valley of northern Colombia, for the Chibcha or Muisca, also of Colombia, and for the polities of the Greater Antilles. Several caveats are in order. First, since the circum-Caribbean data were recorded by European soldiers, missionaries, and government officials, the possibility of ethnocentric skewing in their accounts must be recognised. No specific case is called into question on this account, but it is possible, for example, that the definitiveness of some statements regarding succession by the eldest son reflects European expectations of primogeniture. Alternatively, we cannot dismiss primogeniture as ethnocentric skewing without firm evidence thereof, for it could well have been characteristic of indigenous polities, too. Second, the various ethnohistoric records written by diverse European observers are not fully comparable one with another in terms of the depth or extent or, probably, accuracy of information contained. These unavoidable inconsistencies and inadequacies limit analysis and may cause unrecognised errors in interpretation. Third, it should be understood that in all these cases the offices under discussion are those of high chiefs or regional lords and not necessarily those of more localised kin group or territorial leaders, for whom somewhat different rules of succession may have obtained. Fourth, it must be emphasised that references to inheritance of office via the patri-line or the matri-line refer to rules directing individual access to specific positions and privileges and should not be taken to mean that lineages were basic social units unless such is specifically stated. The term 'kin group' is used to refer to the organisational units of circum-Caribbean societies, for most of which we have no evidence regarding lineality as a structural principle (see Goldman 1970: 418-43).

Finally, I do not intend to account for the development of the various circum-Caribbean succession systems, simply discuss them as they were recorded. Consideration of reasons for the similarities and differences among them goes beyond the purpose of this article.

The evidence

Panama. Data describing procedures for succession to chiefly office in pre- Columbian Panama are recorded by Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes, who resided in the isthmus for a number of years. His short and sometimes ambiguous account, which may refer primarily to Panama east of the Rio Chagre (Canal Zone), reads as follows:

The eldest son succeeds his father, and if there are no sons, the oldest daughter becomes the heir and is married to her leading vassal. But if the oldest son is survived by daughters and not sons, the daughters do not become his heirs, but the sons of the second daughter, because they know definitely that she is of their family. Just as my sister's son most certainly is my nephew, and the son or daughter of my brother may be doubted to be his own (I 959: 3 I).

According to Oviedo, the normal procedure in the case of chiefly office was vertical succession from father to eldest son (fig. Ia, step i).

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If there were no sons, the oldest daughter assumed office and was married to a man of highest possible rank ('her leading vassal') (fig. Ia, step 2). The final move restored the office of chief to a legitimate male member of the ruling kin group, a man who, as Oviedo notes in another virtually identical passage (i 85 3: bk 29, ch. 27, I 3 3), would also be a descendant (nieto) of the ancestral chief. This successor must be the son of a woman of the kin group, for he will be genealogically validated as chief by the indisputable fact of his birth to a woman of this group. (In Oviedo's words, 'just as my sister's son most certainly is my nephew, and the son or daughter of my brother may be doubted to be his own'.) Moreover, this successor is not to be the son of the daughter holding office, but a child of the sister of the deceased chief (fig. I a, step 3). With the assumption of office by a son of this sister, 'patri-line' succession within the ruling kin group is officially re-established.

In previous publications (Helms 1976; 1979) I have analysed the various strategies and assumptions implied by this succession pattern at some length. It will suffice here to note several general conclusions. The data appear to indicate that the public expression of chiefship resided in highest ranked males; hence the preference for succession in the male line and the requirement that a female office-holder, if such should occur, be married to a high-ranking male subject. Presumably it fell to this husband to perform the public functions of chiefship during what we would then more appropriately consider the regency of his wife. Yet the Panamanian evidence further suggests that although males were the preferred rulers, in some circumstances sex was jurally irrelevant, at least when the filial line of succession from father to eldest son was broken. The eldest daughter who assumed high office and safeguarded the succession presumably did so by virtue of her high rank as first born of the ruling line. This high personal position, however, may not have entitled her either actually to rule (her husband's postulated role) or to hold office as legal successor if these functions were reserved for men.

Oviedo's data also clearly indicate that a male ruler from a collateral line was not regarded as a legitimate successor to the chiefship (at least by those currently holding power) unless he was born to a woman of the ruling kin group. Oviedo stresses this point both in his statement on succession and in another passage which indicates that the question of paternity could, in fact, be troublesome: 'For the most part these women are virtuous, but there are some, especially among high-born ladies, who give themselves to any man who wants them, saying that noble and high-born women should never refuse to grant anything requested of them. Only low-born women refuse' (I959: 3 I; cf I853: bk 29, ch. 27, I33-4).

Pascual de Andagoya, another observer of early sixteenth-century Panamanian customs, provides additional evidence for the importance of birth as a legitimising principle even for the filial heir. 'They married one wife', he says, 'and they held a festival on the day of the wedding... The sons of this woman were those who inherited the lordship or house' (Andagoya i 865: I 3, my emphasis). Other women were taken as concubines, Andagoya notes, but their children did not inherit (i 865: I 3). Andagoya's narrative, in fact, suggests that it might be more accurate to amend Oviedo's initial statement on succession to read 'the eldest son, he born of the principal wife of the lord, succeeds his father ....' (see fig. 1b). Finally, the succession pattern implies that a collaterally related male assumed chiefship if direct filial succession failed because the ruling group anticipated the possibility of competition for the office of chief from other elite kin groups. I have argued elsewhere (I979: 27), however, that the son of the eldest daughter did not inherit the chiefship, in order to reduce the possibility of political takeover by the kin of the regent daughter's highly ranked husband.

Colombia: the Cauca Valley. In I535 an observant young soldier, Pedro de Cieza de Leon, arrived at the newly founded Spanish settlement of San Sebastian de Uraba on the northwest coast of Colombia. During the next few years he accompanied several expeditions exploring the territory inland from Uraba and portions of the Cauca Valley. Cieza de Leon's account of his travels is now regarded as a major ethnohistoric source for the Cauca region (Cieza de Leon I864). His several short statements regarding inheritance of chiefship in the Cauca Valley can be pieced together to give a general picture of succession to high office practised among at least some of the societies of northwestern Colombia. I

In the Cauca Valley, that is, the environs of Antioquia, Anzerma, Arma, and elsewhere, Cieza says that 'the son of the chosen woman inherits the lordship, and if there is no son, the son of the lord's sister inherits' (i864: 49); 'they marry their nieces, and sometimes their sisters, and the son of the principal wife inherits the lordship; for all these Indians, if they are chiefs, have many wives. If a chief has no son, the son of his sister succeeds' (I864: 63-4, see also pp. 73, 84, 89). In addition, should a chief die without children 'his principal wife succeeds, and when she dies the nephew of the deceased chief inherits; if he is the son of a sister' (I864: 83).<sup>2</sup>

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As figure 2, step i illustrates, vertical filial inheritance was the ideal, with the son's genealogical legitimacy established by his birth to the chief's principal wife. She herself, being either a sister of the chief or a niece, very likely a sister's daughter (see note 2), was a highly ranked woman of the ruling kin group. In the absence of a son as heir, the principal wife of the deceased chief succeeded to the office, apparently for the duration of her life (fig. 2, step 2). At her death, the son of a sister of the deceased chief succeeded to the chiefship (fig. 2, step 3).

Several similarities appear between Cauca succession procedures reported by Cieza and that identified for Panama. Among both the Cauca chiefdoms and the rank societies of Panama, the public expression of chiefship and the legitimate inheritance of office ideally fell to a male, whose genealogical legitimacy was validated by birth to the principal wife of the ruling lord or to a woman of the ruling kin group. In contrast to the Panamanian pattern, however, among Cauca polities the role of a highly ranked woman—perhaps the highest ranked woman—as successor or as regent fell to the principal wife of the deceased lord rather than to his eldest daughter, although this wife, being sister or niece (ZD), was also a close consanguineal relative. Finally, since in the Cauca case the principal wife held office until her death (which may or may not have applied to Panamanian eldest daughters), and since we are given no indication that the duties of office were shared by a male (though they may have been), we may tentatively assume that the principal wife-cum-regent also may have ruled publicly to some degree. That is to say, when acting as regent her high status may have overcome limitations on public performance otherwise accorded her sex.

A report by the conquistador Jorge Robledo (under whom Cieza de Leon served) regarding the province of Ancerma in the middle Cauca valley also contains information on succession patterns which, although stated differently, is not in serious contradiction with Cieza's more detailed statements and in some matters augments them. Robledo says,

The women whom the lords take are daughters of lords of the comarca; and they have ten or twelve women.... And they have this custom, that among all the wives they have, the first who gives birth to a son is regarded as principal among them all and the son inherits and is held in much veneration by the subjects even though the father is still living, and if the oldest dies, the second [son] succeeds, and if there is no son, a daughter succeeds (i 865: 394).

It is logically possible that the 'daughters of lords' whom chiefs marry may include nieces, as in Cieza de Leon's report, if chiefs' sisters were married to various other 'lords of the comarca' (region, district), which seems reasonable. Robledo also identifies the sequence in which children succeed their father, although there is an obvious deviation from Cieza's account in the mention of the succession of a daughter in the absence of sons. Robledo further clarified the manner in which a principal wife was selected, which suggests that Cieza's mention of principal wife as regent, if accurate, applied not because a chief was childless but because he had outlived his children, or at least his sons, by this wife.

Recognition of the principal wife as regent if her sons (or children) predeceased their parents could be interpreted further as an attempt to restrict the pool of relatives available for succession (i.e. to 'shed' other wives' children), and thus reduce the possibility of divisive conflicts for succession among sons of other wives (cf. Goody 1966: 30). It could also prevent, or reduce, attempts at usurpation of the chiefship by other lords of the comarca until succession was settled upon another close, indisputable 'blood relative' of the deceased chief, i.e. a sister's son.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Robledo's statement that the indicated heir is accorded the esteem of the populace even during his father's lifetime is valuable evidence for at least the *de jure* existence of a determinate mode of succession among these chiefdoms.

Colombia: the Muisca. Information concerning succession to chiefship among the Muisca or Chibcha proper of the Colombian Cordillera Oriental is sketchy and sometimes contradictory. Chroniclers' statements regarding inheritance patterns in general have been collected by Broadbent, who considers the inconsistencies in the various accounts due in part to the conquistadors' unfamiliarity with general Muisca kinship concepts. Some of the variation may also be attributed to changes introduced after conquest by the Europeans (Broadbent 1964: i 8, 23; Villamarin & Villamarin 1975: 176).

The only point of basic agreement among most sources records the succession to the chiefship by the son of a sister of the incumbent ruler. This pattern, which ignores the father-son succession characteristic of Panama and the Cauca region, reflected the strong 'matrilineal' element in Muisca kinship and political organisation in general (see Villamarin & Villamarin 1975). It was also clearly consistent with the pattern we have noted so far in Panamanian and Cauca valley polities for successors to be genealogically legitimised by birth to a highly ranked woman of the ruling kin group.

It is conceivable that succession by sister's son among Muisca chiefdoms not only reflected the prevailing inheritance pattern in general, but was seen as politically advantageous from the perspective of the ruling group. As Goody points out, matri-line succession may increase the loyalty of the sons of the ruler, who have little to gain, indeed much to lose, by his death or dethronement. Under systems of patri-line succession, in contrast, the expected succession by the stipulated son (the 'Prince Hal problem') unavoidably produces tensions between the incumbent and his heir, whose loyalty to his father may be challenged by his own anticipated ascendancy (Goody 1966: 23, 34). Sister's son succession would seem to allow both for loyal support by the sons of the lord's wives, who could provide an important power bloc for their father (see Goody 1966: 54, note 18; 29-30), and for pre-selected succession by a genealogically validated male of the ruling group.

It is interesting to note that in specifying sister's son inheritance, Muisca succession rules accepted as a preferred pattern that line of succession held as an alternative in the polities of the Cauca Valley and Panama. According to material summarised by Luis Duque Gomez, the alternate pattern utilised by Muisca in the event of the incumbent lord having no sister's son

allowed the incumbent simply to select his successor from those deemed most worthy within his kin group (Duque Gomez 1967: 481, 484). It is also possible that this procedure governed selection of a regent to serve until a very young sister's son had completed the training necessary for an heir (see Oviedo 1852: bk 26, ch. 3 I, 4 Io). If a lord died without heir, a group of electors, apparently high priests, selected both his successor and the principal wife of the new lord from the eligible members of the ruling group (Duque Gomez 1967: 484-5, 506).

Greater Antilles. Rules for succession to the office of chief among the so-called Taino of the Greater Antilles are also somewhat uncertain. As William Sturtevant has noted, 'the primary sources are contradictory and confused' (1960: 36). Yet these sources are also intriguing since they hint at additional complications of inheritance and succession which may or may not have been characteristic of other circum-Caribbean polities.

According to Oviedo, who gives the fullest account, the 'cacicado y estados' first passed to 'the eldest son of any of the chief's wives', probably meaning the first son born to the chief by one of his wives (as among Cauca chiefs, according to Robledo) but possibly indicating that the eldest sons of all the wives would be regarded as candidates for office (1851: bk 5, ch. 3, I36). Oviedo then states that if this eldest son had no sons, the estado fell not to the son of his brother but to the son or daughter of his sister, since this child, being born of a sister rather than of a sister-in-law, would more certainly be the true heir (*sobrino o heredero*) and true descendant (*nieto*) of the family line (*tronco o majoradgo*) (fig. 3a). The wording of this statement and the pattern it describes are clearly similar to his own account of succession in Panama, as Oviedo himself noted (1853: bk 29, ch. 27, I33).

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He also notes a situation in which the highly regarded sister of a chief, a sister who also had been principal wife of another chief, assumed authority in the polity of her brother after the deaths of both husband and brother (1853: I 3 4- 5). It is impossible to draw general conclusions from this one example, but the high respect purportedly accorded the lady Anacaona by her people, following her assumption of this position, indicates a certain propriety about the action. We may speculate that in the apparent absence of an eldest son a chief's sister might succeed to the high office until a sister's son or daughter could assume the position, or in the absence of such. Anacaona's behaviour also suggests that a principal wife was not expected to succeed her deceased husband and/or that a highly ranked woman's prior duty was to her own kin group.

Oviedo then continues his discussion of succession with a confusing passage saying that if the cacique died without children yet had a sister with children, these latter would not inherit the cacicado if the chief had a brother by the same father. This brother would inherit that portion of the holdings that derived from their mutual father. Similarly, holdings derived from the chief's mother would be inherited by the relative closest to the mother (1853: I36). This intriguing description calls to mind the inheritance procedures of the Mixtec of Mesoamerica as described

by Spores (1974). Members of Mixtec ruling families, both men and women, could acquire multiple titles to various chiefships through inheritance, marriage alliances and/or military conquest. These titles were held as an aggregate—they were not combined—and in elite marriages husband and wife or wives kept their respective titles separate. That is to say, a wife's holdings were maintained in her line and passed on to her children, while a husband's holdings were maintained in his line and passed on to his children. When titles to holdings were vacated by death, incapacity, or abdication, title reverted to the closest direct lineal descendant of the vacating person or, if a direct descendant were unavailable, to a transversely placed relative. Royal titles could also be transmitted as an aggregate to one heir or be divided among several heirs or be otherwise assigned (see Spores 1974: 302-6).

Oviedo's description for the Greater Antilles of inheritance by a childless chief's brother of holdings derived from their father and of inheritance by a mother's relative of holdings derived from the chief's mother may be evidence that a comparable system of highly individualised bilateral inheritance also existed in the islands, presumably as adjunct to succession rules stipulating eldest son or sister's son as heir to the chiefly station. His statement seems to refer to complications which could arise in a situation in which elite husband and wife once held separate titles to estates, which titles then passed to their son, the now-deceased and childless chief. Upon his death titles reverted to the closest relatives in the father's and mother's respective kin groups (fig. 3b).

Accounts by other chroniclers for the Greater Antilles are far simpler than Oviedo's statement. According to Peter Martyr (Anghera 1912: VOL. I, 387), the heir to the chiefship was the eldest son of the chief's eldest sister, or failing such a son, the child of another sister, for 'this child is bound to be of their blood. They do not consider the children of their wives as legitimate'. Failing sisters' children, a brother's child was chosen, and failing such, a child of the chief. Las Casas felt that he did not completely understand inheritance and succession procedures (which would seem to imply that they were more complicated than he records), but notes that the sister's sons and not the sons of the chief inherited his holdings by virtue of their genealogical legitimacy (1909 ch. 199, 521).

In light of these somewhat conflicting data, several patterns are proposed, quite tentatively, for the Greater Antilles. In order to accommodate the evidence, the proposed rulings associate the two distinct concepts of individualised inheritance and eldest son or sister's son succession with a parallel distinction between inherited holdings and individually acquired holdings, respectively. First, if a lord held offices and titles by virtue of inheritance from one or both parents, these offices and titles would not be combined but would be regarded as an aggregate of separate holdings. If the chief had children, these various holdings would be inherited by one or more of them. His children would also be eligible to inherit other titles and offices from their respective mothers. If the chief were childless, however, his various inherited titles and offices would be separately inherited by the closest relatives of his father's and mother's kin groups. Second, if the lord acquired offices and titles by his own efforts, as, for example, through military conquest,

rights to inheritance of, or succession to, these titles or offices passed to his eldest son(s). If the lord died childless, or if, in fact, his sons were not considered legitimate genealogical heirs, as some chroniclers indicate, his sister's children were his heirs.<sup>4</sup>

### Implications of determinacy

The two general categories of determinate and indeterminate modes of succession as described by Goody offer a significant contrast with respect to the handling of conflict over succession to high office. Points of tension and the possibility of open conflict cannot be entirely avoided by either succession mode, but efforts to direct succession systems towards one or the other may determine to some extent where tensions and conflicts are most likely to erupt or, alternatively, where they may be more readily contained.

If successfully operative, determinate succession systems, in which an heir is pre-selected according to specified lines of succession prior to the incumbent's death, avoid conflict by contenders for the office at the time of succession, and thus may allow for smoother transitions of office. Conflict is more likely to erupt, however, during periods of incumbency, when tensions may develop between the incumbent and his designated successor or between the successor and factions opposing him. Indeterminate modes of succession are more likely to experience conflict situations in just the reverse order. By not designating a successor during an incumbency the period of rule may be more peaceful and secure. Conflicts are likely to erupt with stronger force, however, during the interregnum while the selection process proceeds.

Judging from the ethnohistoric data, the circum-Caribbean chiefdoms appear at least to have formulated determinate modes of succession. Since we have very few situational data with which to test the chroniclers' statements, however, the success of these rules in operation cannot be adequately judged. Indeed, there is some reason to believe, as we shall see, that the chroniclers' statements may reflect the hopes and expectations of the ruling kin group as much as, or even more than, they report actual lines of succession. Nonetheless, the rules suggest the general hypothesis that among these chiefdoms, conflict at the time of succession was considered the greater peril, or otherwise stated, smooth transition of chiefship was the more desirable goal.

Orderly transition may reflect more than the pragmatic political interests of the ruling descent group. Smoothly achieved succession to chiefship may also symbolise values consonant with the perspective, characteristic of rank societies in general, that chiefship is a sacred trust. There is considerable evidence suggesting that among circum-Caribbean polities, the office of chief was considered a natural and necessary position linking human society with the wider, sacred universe. The incumbent chief served as sacred intermediary between the ordered ('civilised, moral') human society under his charge and the equally-ordered cosmos (see Helms 1979; n.d.). If chiefship symbolised rightful (sacred) order, and if the chief as a sacred personage (as priest or in association with priests) was believed to control and direct the expression of sacred-secular order as it applied to the society under his direction, then smooth, ideally trouble-free succession

to office could also serve as 'model of' and 'model for' the continuation of sacred-secular social and universal order. As Goody has pointed out, smooth succession from incumbent to successor-designate (*le roi est mort, vive le roi*) can express the stability and continuity of the rulership; indeed, 'not simply the kingship but the king himself never dies' (1966: 29). Yet continuous viability of the chiefship (implied for the circum-Caribbean by preferred filial succession and designation of sister's son as heir via 'purity of blood') may be symbolic of a still wider continuity and order. In this context, overt acceptance of the likelihood of discord and conflict during the interregnum, which indeterminate modes of succession generally assure, would, by recognition of a 'normalcy' in cycles of order (rule) and disorder (interregnum), be in antithesis to concepts regarding the fundamental nature of chiefship as continuity of order.

Yet as a number of scholars have indicated, conflict and ostensible 'disharmony' are unavoidable in hereditary systems, regardless of the mode of succession, to the extent that rulers must also be individuals personally capable of fulfilling the obligations and conducting the duties of their offices (see Burling 1974: 13-52, 256-9; Goody 1966: 13). Power struggles are also unavoidable given that, in hierarchically-ordered polities, chiefly office is unique and non-duplicating', and therefore is a scarce resource; 'if you want the position, there is only one way to get it-by ousting the present incumbent' (Goody 1966: 2). In the circum-Caribbean, if we are correct in interpreting succession rules as evidence of the desire to avoid or reduce power struggles at time of succession, the alternative threat of increased tension and rivalry during the incumbent's term of office would place considerable importance upon the personal capabilities of the man who would successfully rule. Therefore, it could be argued that the conflict cost engendered by more determinate succession modes was considered bearable, not only for the possibility of smoother transitions of rule, but because the incumbent, by definition a most able man, could be expected successfully to handle and contain competition and rivalry during his reign.

Personal ability, however, must be indicated and proven by overt, energetic action, particularly if it is to be politically significant (cf. Goldman 1970: 498).<sup>5</sup> I have argued at some length elsewhere (Helms 1979) that in Panama 'activity' was a fundamental factor in the conduct of chiefly office and that rivalry and competition was a basic characteristic of Panamanian politics. It is not unlikely that chiefly activity and elite rivalry were characteristic of other circum-Caribbean chiefdoms, too. Throughout this region, he who would be a successful chief may overtly have had to express the inherent energies and capabilities by which (along with genealogical legitimacy) he was presumed fit for office-in constant action against rival competitors in war, competitive games, long-distance exchange and distribution and pursuit of esoteric knowledge (cf. Helms 1979). In such a political climate, tensions and challenges generated by an incumbent chief's designation of his successor would provide another arena appropriate for the expression of chiefly capabilities. Determinate succession rules would fit the postulated need for overt evidence of chiefly abilities through activity during the incumbent's lifetime, as well as implying a preference for smooth succession to office at his death-whether for the symbolic value of such a transition or to preserve the power of the ruling kin group in an

atmosphere of rivalry. Yet the requirement that the lord be an able man of action could have unavoidably forced competition and rivalry at times of succession, too. Oviedo recognised this aspect of circum-Caribbean politics.<sup>6</sup> In a brief statement immediately following his formal description of succession to office in Panama (and he noted its strong similarities to procedures in the Greater Antilles), he says that it was more common to have as lord he who was 'the more able' of those who aspired to the inheritance, in the manner that many times occurred among Christians where 'armaments had more favor than justice' (1853: bk 29, ch. 27, I33).

#### Flexibility in alternatives

The need for an able successor is also reflected in the very rules for succession. If the chroniclers' statements are carefully read, flexibility in determination of a successor is stipulated, too, even as rules to restrict the choice are offered. Generally speaking, the determinate element in these statements express what to do in the presumably normal event that the incumbent lord has a preferred son (Panama and the Cauca Valley) or a sister's son (Muisca and perhaps the Antilles). If there are no surviving sons or sister's sons, however, the guidelines are less definitive. To be sure, an alternative plan is identified and contenders limited in number by specification of particular requirements, i.e. birth to a specific woman ('second daughter' or 'sister'), but the issue of which particular successor is to be chosen from the field of candidates is left open.

In Panama the sons of the 'second daughter' are to succeed, but which son, in case of several, is not indicated. In the Cauca Valley, the son of the lord's sister is to succeed, but which son of which sister is not specified. Among the Chibcha, a worthy man of the kin group is chosen by the incumbent or by electors if there are no sister's sons. In the Greater Antilles, where matters seem more complicated (or our data relatively more complete), flexibility in specific designation seems to run throughout in cases where sister's son succession does not apply. It is impossible to judge whether this appearance of choice was accurately stated by the chroniclers or simply reflects accidents of writing style. Yet there does seem to be a certain consistency, particularly in the data for Panama, the Cauca Valley, and the Muisca, in that the preferred line of succession (see fig. 4a) is expressed more definitively than the alternate line (see fig. 4b).

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The evidence for increasing flexibility suggests that the preferred successor, as a close kinsman (eldest son in Panama and Cauca Valley; sister's son for Muisca and Antilles) is formally deemed worthy of designation on primarily genealogical grounds, but that as genealogical ties with the incumbent become even slightly more distant (daughter's or sister's son in Panama and Cauca Valley; man of the kin group for the Muisca) the criterion of ability is 'officially' emphasised as much as the legitimacy of blood. Conceivably this apparent shift in formal requirements would express recognition that competition by rival contenders may increase as a successor's genealogical tie with the previous incumbent loosens. Hence the greater premium on personal ability if the successor is to hold his position.

Nonetheless, appropriate genealogical ties were still a fundamental requirement, and birth to an appropriate woman of the ruling kin group is the most incontestable of factors according to this credential. Thus we may tentatively conclude for the circum-Caribbean chiefdoms of the early sixteenth century that in the persons of close female relatives of the lord was expressed the ruling group's essential socio-political solidarity. Such women provided genealogical legitimacy, as well as fulfilling roles as regents (cf. Cohen 1969). In contrast, high-ranking manhood, although perhaps also expressive of political order and continuity, was associated with the more active and individualised, and thus more fragmenting and divisive, affairs of state.

## NOTES

1 For discussion of the diagnostic characteristics of chiefdoms in general see Fried 1967 and Service 1971. The circum-Caribbean chiefdoms are briefly described in Steward & Faron 1959, Schwerin 1973, and Helms in press, which include additional bibliography.

2 Similarly, among Indians of the Uraba region, according to Cieza, 'the sons inherit their fathers' property, if they are born of the principal wife, and they marry the daughters of their sisters' (1864: 40).

3 If, as Robledo says, the chief took as wives daughters of lords of the comarca, these lords would also be grandfathers to the chief's sons, and as such conceivably could lay retrospective claim to the polity inherited by a grandson. Inheritance by a sister's son, in contrast, would stress continuity with the ancestral grandfather of the previous incumbent.

4 If the chief's principal wife were also a sister, possibly his eldest sister, then Martyr's account would fit with Oviedo's re succession by eldest son.

5 This position follows Goldman's interpretation of status systems in Polynesia, where, he argues, the high honour, authority and potential power inherent in chiefly status are celebrated in a more efficacious manner by activity than by inertia. Which is to say that such power is not something static, something 'held' or 'obtained', but is a dynamic process, an active exercise.

6 See Rostworowski (1960) for a discussion in some detail of the importance of personal capability as a factor in the often bitter political struggles among potential heirs (and their factions) to the office of the Inca in Peru.

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