This is a study of how political hierarchy is constructed among the Asante. It explores the principles that legitimate chieftaincy and hierarchies among chiefly offices. Furthermore, it shows how the institution of chieftaincy is connected to certain aspects of social structure and belief system and how it is precisely because of this connectedness that chieftaincy continues to be viable despite major changes in Asante (or Ghanaian) society. The study is based on one-year fieldwork in Ghana (2000-2001). In addition to that, some archival materials have been used. The Asante people belong to a large ethnic and language group called the Akan. The Akan people live in the coastal and forest areas of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. The social and political organisation of all Akan groups is more or less uniform. It is often said that the Akan political order provides a classic example of a chiefdom or segmentary state. The best known of the Akan polities is the kingdom of Asante (Ashanti), which is a union of a number of autonomous chiefdoms under one king. Every Asante chiefdom is a distinct territorial unit centred on the chief's capital town or village. Today the Asante kingdom coexists with the Republic of Ghana.

In terms of modern anthropology, the classical definition of Asante social and political structure is by Meyer Fortes. His theory on Asante as a hierarchical, centralized polity, which coexists with a segmentary lineage system, is the starting point of this study. The study begins by discussing the Asante kinship and marriage systems in Chapter 2, and particularly how the ideas of hierarchy and political relations relate to them. This discussion is linked to Fortes' view of the matrilineal descent group as the primary political unit among the Asante. Fortes' idea of the hierarchy of offices in the Asante kingdom and its component chiefdoms approximated the idea of graduated authority or a chain of command, and hence he saw the structure of the kingdom as similar to that of a modern nation state. In the dissertation, a different kind of concept of hierarchy is introduced. In addition to the chain of command, the chiefs are also connected through the segmentary lineage system, bilateral kinship, friendship, and spatial cohabitation. These relations are also hierarchical, but they are based on the concept of seniority and not authority. These matters are discussed in Chapter 4. Since these relations are also a matter of political competition, they also become subject to complicated processes of reordering. These processes, which also involve a reconnection of the present time to the founding past through genealogies and historical narratives, are discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 shows how both relations of authority and seniority are thought and discussed by reference to kinship terminology.

Chapter 7 discusses how in the Asante thought power in seen to transcend human agency. Chiefs are considered to obtain power from the supernatural through sacrifice, but this requires recognition of deities, ancestors, subordinate officeholders, and subjects as exchange partners. Supernatural agencies receive sacrifices for power and subordinates are given jural rights for providing victims for sacrifice. These ritual exchanges shape the relations between the offices of chiefs as well as between the chiefs and the people. Chapter 8 shows how authority is shared and exercised in ritual and the commonplace Western notion that authority is always vested in formal office-centered structures is questioned.

Chapter 9 discusses the position of the institution of chieftaincy in Asante (and Ghana) today and how it has endured the challenges of colonial and post-colonial times. It is concluded that Asante chieftaincy is a specific type of non-western political institution deep-rooted in the Asante society and culture, and thus it has not been replaced by the colonial or later post-colonial governments.