

The participants in the levy got a percentage of the cattle taken but the majority went to the Reth (Pumphreys 1941: 12; compare Evans-Pritchard 1948: 15–16).

Significantly, it was precisely in the 1840s when Shilluk kings, emboldened by an alliance with foreign merchants, began trying to move beyond raiding and create a systematic apparatus for the extraction of tribute, that many ordinary Shilluk began to cast doubt on the very legitimacy of the kingship, and to throw in their lot with a different set of predatory freebooters (Mercer 1974: 423–24). As it turned out, the results were catastrophic—the Arab slave-traders with whom they aligned themselves turned out to be far more ruthless and destructive than anything they had previously encountered—but the pattern remains clear. As in the stories about the mar, popular resistance appeared at exactly the point where royal power tried to move beyond mere predatory raiding, and to formally institutionalize itself.

The kings' rather unsavory retainers lived at the margins of Fashoda. Its center was composed of his own compound, and the houses of his wives. All sorts of dark rumors surrounded the place. According to Seligman's account, quoted near verbatim in *The golden bough*:

During the day the king surrounded himself with his friends and bodyguards, and an aspirant to the throne could hardly hope to cut his way through them and strike home. It was otherwise at night. For then the guards were dismissed and the king was alone in his enclosure with his favourite wives, and there was no man near to defend him except a few herdsmen, whose huts stood a little way off. The hours of darkness were therefore the season of peril for the king. It is said that

# The divine kingship of the Shilluk

**On violence, utopia, and the human condition, or, elements for an archaeology of sovereignty**

David Graeber

2011

intrigue against each other, more or less guaranteed that only very clever, and very ruthless, men could have much chance of becoming *reth*. It also guaranteed that the violence on which the royal office was founded on always remained explicit, that *reths* were never too far removed from the simple bandit kings from which they were presumably descended.

Everything is happening as if the *reth*'s subjects were resisting *both* the institutionalization of power, *and* the euphemization of power that seems to inevitably accompany it. Power remained predatory. Take for example the matter of tribute. The king's immediate power was based in the *Bang Reth*, his personal retainers, a collection of men cut off from their own communities: orphans, criminals, madmen, prisoners taken in war. He provided them with cattle from his herds, along with ornaments and other booty; they minded his cattle, accompanied royal children, acted as spies, and accompanied him on raids against Arab or Dinka neighbors. They did not, however, have anything to do with the collection of tribute. According to one colonial source, there was no regular system for exacting tribute. Instead, the king would intervene in feuds between communities that had resisted his attempts at mediation:

The Reths... were extremely rich in cattle. They acquired these largely in the following way. Whenever one settlement waged unjustified war upon another or refused repeatedly to obey his order, the Reth would raise as a "royal levy" the adjacent settlements, who would go and drive off the malefactors' cattle and burn their villages. The strength of the levy would vary with the readily calculable strength of the opposition but a good margin of safety would be allowed to ensure that the levy would win. It is said that such levies were in fact seldom resisted, the victim being glad to save their skins at the cost of most of their cattle.

of justice, the last resort of the poor and unfortunate. The king of course dispensed justice as well. The apparent paradox is, as I've emphasized, typical of divine kingship: the king, like God, stands outside any moral order in order to be able to bring one into being. Still, while a prince who successfully lured potential rivals to a feast and then massacred them all might be admired for his cunning, this was hardly the way ordinary people were expected to behave. Nothing in the literature suggests that if a commoner, or even an ordinary member of the royal clan, decided to act in a similar fashion to head off later quarrels over their father's cattle, this would be regarded as anything but a despicably criminal—by the king (if the matter was brought before him) or by anybody else. It was, rather, as if ruthlessness of this sort was to be limited to the royal sphere, and the royal sphere carefully contained and delimited from ordinary life in part for that very reason.

Father Crazzolaro, for instance, insists that this was precisely what the commoner chiefs (called *Jago*) who elected the king wanted: to ensure that everything surrounding kings and princes remained shrouded in mystery, so that it had no effect on ordinary life. "Disputes and intrigues among members of the royal family were known to exist and were shared by the great *Jagos* and their councilors, but seldom affected the people at large... Strifes and murders in the higher social ranks were settled among the great men, in great secrecy, and could never imperil the unity of the country" (Crazzolaro 1951: 129). Indeed, he observed, most ordinary Shilluk would never have dreamed of approaching the royal residence at Fashoda, and when the king did set out on a journey, "most people used to go into hiding or keep out of his path; girls especially do so" (ibid.: 139).

At the same time, the organization of the kingship those chiefs upheld, with no fixed rule of succession, but rather, a year-long interregnum during which dozens of potential candidates were expected to jockey for position, plot and

## Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Theories of divine kingship</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The Shilluk as seen from Equattoria</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Three propositions</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>A brief outline of Shilluk history</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Mytho-history</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>A word on Nilotic cosmologies</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>The legend of Nyikang</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Return to Fashoda</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>The intallation ritual: description</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>The installation ritual: analysis</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Some words by way of conclusion</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>107</b>

## Return to Fashoda

At this point we can return to those institutions themselves.

First of all, a word about the role of violence. Godfrey Lienhardt (1952) insists Nyikang (and hence, the king) has to be seen only as a continuation of the Shilluk conception of God. God is ordinarily seen as neither good nor evil; anything extraordinary contains a spark of the divine; above all, God is the source of life, strength, and intelligence in the universe. Similarly, Nyikang is the source of Shilluk custom, but not, necessarily, of a system of ethics, and kings—who are referred to as “children of God”—were admired above all for their cleverness, and for the ruthless ingenuity with which they played the game of power.<sup>1</sup> Royals regularly slaughtered their brothers and cousins as a preemptive measure, with the assumption that they were almost necessarily plotting against the king; assassination and betrayal was expected, and successful conspirators, admired. Lienhardt concludes that intelligence and success (the latter typically reflected in prosperity) were the main Shilluk social values: “kings, and all others inspired by *juok* [divinity], are sacred because they manifest divine energy and knowledge, and they do so by being strong, cunning, and successful, as well as appearing to be in closer touch with the superhuman than ordinary men” (Lienhardt 1952: 160; so too Schnepel 1988: 449).

All this seems true—but the situation seems to have been rather more complicated. God was also spoken of as the source

---

<sup>1</sup> Similarly Schnepel: the ingenious application of violence was valued in itself—or, at least, valued insofar as it was seen to contribute to the “vitality” of the Shilluk nation as a whole.

made into new body of Nyikang. Yet here, instead of an image of eternity, the river becomes an image of loss. According to one source (1952), the *mar* was “the luck of the Shilluk,” now forever lost. It seems likely the debate over the nature of the *mar* reflected a more profound debate about whether military good fortune was always luck for the Shilluk as a whole—a question on which royal and popular perspectives are likely often to have been sharply divided. And the fact that such arguments were said to be going on in the time of Tokot, in the generation immediately before the creation of the institutions of sacred kingship, once again underlines how much debate there was at that time about the very purposes of royal power.

## Abstract

Since Frazer’s time, Shilluk kingship has been a flashpoint of anthropological debates about the nature of sovereignty, and while such debates are now considered irrelevant to current debates on the subject, they need not be. This essay presents a detailed analysis of the history, myth, and ritual surrounding the Shilluk institution to propose a new set of distinctions: between “divine kingship” (by which humans can become god through arbitrary violence, reflexively defining their victims as “the people”) and “sacred kingship” (the popular domestication of such figures through ritual), and argues that kingship always represents the image of a temporary, imperfect solution to what is taken to be the fundamental dilemma of the human condition—one that can itself only be maintained through terror.

---

“God kills us.”

States, I once suggested, have a peculiar dual character. They are always “at the same time forms of institutionalized raiding or extortion, and utopian projects” (Graeber 2004: 65). Obviously they are also many other things. But those two elements always remain crucial to their nature. In this essay I’d like to put some flesh on this assertion by reexamining one of the most

famous cases in the history of anthropology: the divine kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan.<sup>1</sup>

The Shilluk kingdom might seem an odd case since it clearly is not a state by any of the usual definitions of the term—the king lacked any sort of administration and had little systematic power. Nonetheless, I suspect this is one of the reasons generations of anthropologists have found the Shilluk case so compelling. There is an intuition, here, that some of the key mechanisms of political power are best observed when stripped to their bare essentials. I would also insist that this is not because the Shilluk political system is in any sense “primitive”; not because forms of sovereignty were only beginning to emerge like some half-formed idea. To the contrary, it seems obvious that anyone living so close to ancient centers of civilization like Egypt, Meroe, or Ethiopia was likely to be perfectly aware of what a state was. Rather, it was because those elements in Shilluk society who would have liked to create something along those lines had, by the time first Ottoman and then British colonial authorities arrived, achieved such limited success at convincing the bulk of the Shilluk population to go along with them. As a result, the Shilluk kingdom was a system of institutionalized raiding, and a utopian project, and very little else.

The word “utopian” might seem odd here; but one might just as easily substitute “cosmological project.” Royal palaces, royal cities, or royal courts almost invariably become microcosms, images of totality. The central place is imagined as a model of perfection, but at the same time, as a model of the universe; the kingdom, ideally, should be another reproduction of the same pattern on a larger spatial scale. I emphasize the word “ideally.” Royal palaces and royal cities always fall slightly short

---

<sup>1</sup> I should note that “Shilluk” is an Arabization of the native term, *Collo* or *Chollo*. Most of the king’s current subjects now use *Chollo* when writing in English. I have kept to the historical usage largely to avoid confusion.

and families, and began to protest and refuse his orders. In a fit of pique, he threw the *mar* into the Nile. Here the story fast-forwards about a half century to the reign of Atwot (c1825-1835), who is elected as a warrior king on the behest of a cluster of settlements plagued by Dinka raiders. He fights a battle with the invaders but is defeated, so, in a bold move, he decides to retrieve the talisman. Atwot consults with the descendants of Tokot’s wives at his lineage shrine, and, despite widespread skepticism, rows out with his companions to the spot where the *mar* was lost, sacrificing three cows along the way, and dives to the bottom of the river. He remains underwater so long his companions think he is lost, but after many hours, returns with the genuine article. Atwot proceeds to raise an army, conquers the Dinka and is victorious against all that stand in his path. However, before long, the same thing begins to happen: he is carried from conquest to conquest, but his warriors begin protesting the incessant wars, and finally Atwot too throws the pot back in the river in frustration. There have been no subsequent attempts to retrieve the *mar*.<sup>7</sup>

The story seems to be about why the Shilluk kingdom never became an empire. It is as if every time kings move beyond defending the home territory or conducting raids beyond its borders, every time they attempt to levy armies and begin outright schemes of conquest, they find themselves stymied by protests and passive resistance. They respond with passive aggression: vanishing in a huff, throwing precious heirlooms in the river. As we’ll soon see, the scene of the king sacrificing cows and then diving down into the river to find a lost object appears to be a reference to a stage in the inauguration ceremonies in which the candidate has to find a piece of wood that will be

---

<sup>7</sup> This sort of behavior was occasionally noted even in colonial times. According to Howell and Thomson (1946: 76), there used to be ceremonial drums kept in Fashoda for royal funerals with special guardians, until *reth* Fafiti, annoyed that his predecessor had not used them to honor the previous *reth*, threw them in the Nile.

that they execute others on the king's orders, but rather that it is they who are in charge of presiding over the execution of the king. A *reth* would always have a certain number of Ororo wives; it is they who are expected to announce when he is sick or failing in his sexual powers; according to some, it is they who actually suffocate the king (Seligman 1911: 222; cf. note 21). In other versions it is the male Ororo bodyguard, who also preside over his burial.<sup>6</sup> All sources stress it is difficult to know anything for absolute certain about such matters, about which discreet people knew better than to much inquire, and doubtless practices varied, but it is critical that the king was constantly surrounded by those he had originally degraded, and who were eventually to kill him.

At this point we have reached historical times, which begin with the long and prosperous reign of King Bwoc, immediately followed by Tokot, Queen Abudok, and the historical creation of the sacred kingship at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

There is one last story worth telling here. This is the story of the *mar*. The *mar* was some kind of talisman or element of royal regalia that had originally belonged to Nyikang. By the early twentieth century no one quite remembered what it had been: a jewel of some kind, or perhaps a crystal, or a silver pot. According to some, it was a magical charm capable of assuring victory in war. According to others, it was a general token of prosperity and royal power (Hofmayr 1925: 72–75, Paul 1952).

According to Westermann (1912: 143–144) the *mar* was a silver pot that, waved in front of one's enemies, caused them to flee the field of battle. Tokot employed it in many successful wars against the Shilluk's neighbors, many of whom he incorporated into Shillukland, but eventually—a familiar scenario now—his followers grew tired of fighting far from their wives

---

<sup>6</sup> In some versions, the Ororo men are responsible for killing the king “by surprise” if he is wounded in battle or grievously ill (Hofmayr 1925: 178–180), the women kill him otherwise.

of Heaven; kingdoms as a whole never live up to the ideals of the royal court. This is one reason the term “utopia” seems appropriate. These are ideals that by definition can never be realized; after all, if the cosmos, and the kingdom, really could be brought into conformity with the ideal, there would be no excuse for the predatory violence.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect about the Shilluk material is that these two elements are so clearly seen as linked. Sovereignty—that which makes one a sovereign—is seen as the ability to carry out arbitrary violence with impunity. Royal subjects are equal in that they are all, equally, potential victims; but the king too is a victim in suspense, and in myth as well as ritual, it is at the moments when the people gather together to destroy the king—or at least to express their hatred for him—that he is mysteriously transformed into an eternal, transcendental being. In a cosmological system where separation is seen as balanced antagonism, opposition literally as at least potential hostility, the king inhabits a kind of tiny paradise, set apart from birth, death, and sickness; set apart from ordinary society; representing exactly this sort of imperfect ideal. Yet his ability to do so rests on a delicate balance of relations of opposition and barely contained aggression—between humans and gods, between king and people, between fractions of the royal family itself—that will, inevitably, destroy him.

All this will become clearer as I go on. Let me begin, though, with a very brief survey of theories of divine kingship and the place of the Shilluk in them. Then I will demonstrate how I think these pieces can be reassembled to create the elements for a genealogy of sovereignty.

## Theories of divine kingship

The Shilluk first became famous, in Europe and America, through James Frazer's *The golden bough*. They are so firmly identified with Frazer that most are unaware the Shilluk did not even appear in the *The golden bough's* first two editions (1890 and 1900). Originally, in fact, Frazer drew largely on Classical literature in making an argument that all religion was to some degree derived from fertility cults centered on the figure of a dying god, and that the first kings, who embodied that god, were ritually sacrificed. This idea made an enormous impression on anthropology students of the time (and even more, perhaps, on artists and intellectuals), many of whom were to fan out across the world looking for traces of such institutions in the present day. The most successful such student was a young doctor and amateur ethnologist named Charles Seligman, who discovered in the Shilluk kingdom an almost perfect example, in 1911 sending Frazer a description that he incorporated, almost verbatim, in the book's third edition (Seligman 1911, Frazer 1916, Fraser 1990: 200–201).

One reason the Shilluk seemed to fit the bill so nicely was that Frazer argued divine kingship was originally a variety of spirit possession. To find a king whose physical health was felt to be tied to the fertility and prosperity of the kingdom, or even, that was therefore said to be ritually killed when his powers begin to wane, was not difficult. There were endless examples in Africa and elsewhere. But for Frazer, divine kings were literally possessed by a god. Frazer also felt this notion would necessarily lead to a practical problem: how does one pass this divine spirit from one mortal vessel to another? Clearly it would

putting an end to a particular holder of the royal office, that is, either through internal revolt (challenge by an ambitious prince) or being ritually put to death.

Figure 1. mythic origins of the Ororo and the Royal line. *Note: solid arrows refer to rulers who, rather than dying, vanished and were replaced by effigies; the broken arrow refers to rulers who died but whose body vanished and was not replaced by an effigy.*

The role of the Ororo is especially important. This is a class who represent a veritable institutionalization of this constitutive relation of hostility, and potential violence, on which the eternity of the kingdom is founded. Generally, princes who are not elected found their own lineage within the royal clan named after their royal ancestor, and his tomb becomes their lineage shrine. In theory, the king can degrade any of these branches to Ororo status by entering into their lineage shrine at night and performing certain secret rites, but the shrines are guarded and if they're caught trying to enter, the attempt is considered to have failed. one *reth* (Fadiet) is remembered to have failed in an attempt to reduce the descendants of Nyadwai to Ororo status but it is not clear if any other king has ever been successful (Pumphreys 1941: 12–13, Hofmayr 1925: 66; Howell 1953: 202). Most sources suggested none have: another dramatic reflection on the limited power of Shilluk kings. Some (e.g., Crazzolaro 1951: 139) suggest that one reason a king might wish to do so is that marriage is forbidden within the royal lineage; it is only by reducing a branch to Ororo status that a king can then take one of its daughters for his wife.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is precisely this degraded nobility whose role it is to preside over the death of kings. Male members of the caste who accompany the king during ceremonies are sometimes referred to as the “royal executioners,” but here meaning not

---

<sup>5</sup> However Seligman and Seligman (1932: 48) says kings would only take Ororo wives if they were “unusually attractive” since no child of an Ororo could ever become king.



their bodies never recovered; all but the last were then replaced by an effigy. Nyikang was replaced by his timid elder son Cal, who disappeared in circumstances unknown; then by the impetuous Dak, who also vanished in a fit of frustration over popular grumbling over his endless wars of conquest, and finally, by Dak's son Nyidoro.

Nyidoro marks a point of transition. He vanished, but only *after* death. Nyidoro was murdered by his younger brother odak, whereon his body magically disappeared. As a result there was some debate over where he merited a shrine and effigy at all, but in the end it was decided that he did.

If Nyidoro was the first king to die, his killer and successor, odak was the first to be ritually killed. This, however, was a consequence of not of internal conflict (as in the case of his own usurpation), but external warfare: odak was defeated in a battle with the Dinka and the Fung. After witnessing the death of all of his sons except one, he threw Nyikang's sacred spears in the river in a gesture of despair, crying "now all my sons are dead." Needless to say this greatly hurt the feelings of the one son who remained alive. This young man, named Duwat, had been endlessly belittled by his father in the past, and this was the final straw. After promising his father he would degrade all those sons' children to commoners, he snatched one of the spears from the river and single-handedly drove the enemy away (Hofmayr 1925: 66–68, 260–62).

Apparently odak was discreetly finished off soon afterwards, and when Duwat became king, one of his first acts was to degrade the descendants of his brothers to a lower status than the royal clan. They became the Ororo, excluded from succession, but who nonetheless play a key role in royal ritual.

The story began with a Duwat, and with this second Duwat, one might say the first round of the mythic cycle comes to an end. It begins with stories modeled on birth and ends with stories of death: first, the non-deaths of Nyikang and Dak, rejected by their subjects; then, establishing the two typical modes of

demand some sort of ceremony. Yet death tends to be a random and unpredictable affair. Frazer concluded the only way to carry out the ritual in a predictable way was to execute the king, either after a fixed term, or at the very least, when his weakened condition meant death seemed to be approaching anyway.

The Shilluk seemed to provide a genuine example. The Shilluk king, or *reth*, was indeed said to embody a divine being—a god or at least a demi-god—in the person of Nyikang, the legendary founder of the Shilluk nation. Every king was Nyikang. The *reth* was not supposed to die a natural death. He might fall in battle with the nation's enemies. He might be killed in single combat after a rival prince demanded a duel, as they had a right to do, or be suffocated by his own wives or retainers if he was seen to be physically failing (a state which was indeed seen to lead to poor harvests or natural catastrophes). On his death, though, Seligman emphasized, Nyikang's spirit left him and entered a wooden effigy. Once a new *reth* was elected, the candidate had to raise an army and fight a mock battle against the effigy's army in which he was first defeated and captured, then, having been possessed by the spirit of Nyikang, which passed from effigy back into his body, emerged victorious again.

Frazer made the Shilluk famous and their installation ritual has become one of the classic cases in anthropology—which in a way is rather odd, since the Shilluk are one of the few Nilotic peoples never to have been the subject of sustained anthropological fieldwork. In 1948, for instance, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, taking advantage of new ethnographic material, delivered his "Frazer lecture" on the subject. The lecture was essentially designed to put the death-blow to Frazer's whole problematic. Evans-Pritchard argued that there was no such thing as a divine king, that Shilluk kings were probably never ritually executed, and that the installation ritual was not really about transferring a soul, but about resolving the tension between the office

of kingship (figured as Nyikang), that was set above everyone equally, and the particular individual who held it, with his very particular background, loyalties, and local support base:

In my view kingship everywhere and at all times has been in some degree a sacred office. *Rex est mixta persona cum sacerdote*. This is because a king symbolises a whole society and must not be identified with any part of it. He must be in the society and yet stand outside it and this is only possible if his office is raised to a mystical plane. It is the kingship, and not the king who is divine (1948: 36).

The intricacies of Shilluk royal ceremonial, according to Evans-Pritchard, arose from “a contradiction between dogma and social facts” (ibid: 38). The Shilluk were a people sufficiently well-organized to wish for a symbol of national unity, in this case, the king, but not enough to allow that symbolic figure to become the head of an actual government.

Evans-Pritchard was always a bit coy about his theoretical influences, but it is hard not to detect here a distant echo of the Renaissance doctrine of the “King’s Two Bodies,” that is, the “body politic,” or eternal office of kingship, ultimately including the community of his subjects, and “body natural,” which is the physical person of the individual king. This intellectual tradition was later to be the subject of comprehensive study by the German historian Ernst Kantorowicz (1957), whose student Ralph Giesey (1967), in turn, explored the way that during English and French inauguration rituals, as well, the relationship between the two bodies was acted out through royal effigies. Later anthropologists (Arens 1979, 1984; Schnepel 1988, 1995) recognized the similarity with Shilluk ritual and went on to explore the parallels (and differences) much more explicitly.

Evans-Pritchard’s essay opened the way to a whole series of debates, most famously, over his claim that ritual king-killing

the king. Yet in the story, his transcendence of the bonds of mortal existence follows his rejection by the people. Neither is this mere mumbling and discontent: some versions make clear there was at least the threat of actual rebellion. In one (Crazzolaro 1951: 126), Nyikang is speared in the chest by an angry follower. He survives, but then assembles his people to announce his ascent. In every version, he is replaced by an effigy made of *ambatch*, and remains as the vehicle of the prayers of his people, as their intercessor before God. It is through Nyikang, for example, that the king appeals to God for rain (Schnepel 1991: 5859). Though even here the relationship of animosity does not disappear. Unlike more familiar gods, who by definition can do no wrong, the hero continues to be the object of periodic anger and recrimination:

Their veneration of Nikawng does not blind their eyes to his faults. When a prayer has been offered to Nikawng, and the answer is not given, as had been hoped, the disappointed one curses Nikawng. That is true especially in the case of death. When death is approaching, they sacrifice to Nikawng and God, and pray that death may be averted. If the death occurs the bereaved ones curse Nikawng, because he did not exert himself in their behalf (Oyler 1918b: 285).

This passage gains all the more power when one remembers that illness itself was often assumed to be caused by the attacks of royal spirits—most often, Dak—and that mediums possessed by the spirit of Nyikang were the most common curers. Yet in the end we must die, as Nyikang did not; his transcendence of death resulted from, and perpetuates, a relation of permanent at least potential antagonism.

In fact, it was not just Nyikang. None of the first four kings of Shillukland died like normal human beings. Each vanished,

build some house or shrine, to herd Nyikang's sacred cattle, to supply the king with certain delicacies, etc.). Only in the case of people who transform themselves into animals—fish, turtles, fireflies, etc.—does he usually have to call in Dak, to net or spear or otherwise defeat them, whereon they ordinarily turn back into human beings and submit themselves. Submission is what renders people Shilluk (the actual word, *Chollo*, merely means subjects of the *reth*.)<sup>4</sup> Though in a larger sense, intellectual understanding and physical conquest are conflated here; the stories of shape-shifters are paradigmatic: one can only tell what they really are by successfully defeating, even skewering them—that is, literally pinning them down.

For all this, Nyikang's conquest of Shilluk-land remains curiously unfinished. The myths specify that he managed to subdue the southern half of the country, up to about where the capital is now. After this things stalled, as the people, tired of war, begin to murmur and increasingly, openly protest Nyikang's leadership. Finally, at a feast held at the village of Akurwa (what is later to become his temple in Fashoda), Nyikang chides his followers, instructs them on how to maintain his shrine and effigy, and vanishes a whirlwind of his own creation.

Nyikang, all Shilluk insist, did not and could never die. He has become the wind, manifest in animals who behave in strange and uncharacteristic ways, birds that settle among crowds of people; he periodically comes, invisible, to inhabit one or another of his many shrines (Seligman 1911: 220–26, Seligman 1934, Westermann 1912: xlii, Oyler 1918a, Hofmayr 1925: 307, Howell and Thomson 1946: 23–24). Above all he remains immanent in his effigies, and the sacred person of

---

<sup>4</sup> Westermann (1912: 127–134) summarizes the origins of seventy-four different clans. If one discounts the three royal lineages included, and the six for whom no origin is given, we find that forty nine were descended from “servants” of Nyikang, six from “servants” of Dak, six of Odak, one of Tokot, and, most surprisingly, three from servants of Queen Abudok, the last royal figure to play this role—another testimony to her onetime importance.

was simply a matter of ideology, not something that ever really happened. The “did Africans really kill their kings?” debate raged for years, ending, finally, with a general recognition that at least in some cases—the Shilluk being included among them—yes, they did. At the same time, Frazer's ideas turned out to have not been nearly as dead as expected.

No one has been more responsible for the Frazerian revival than the Belgian anthropologist Luc de Heusch—who, ironically, began his intellectual journey (1962) setting out from Evans-Pritchard's point that in order to rule, a king must “stand outside” society. Essentially he asked: what are the mechanisms through which a king is made into an outsider? In any number of African kingdoms, at least, this meant that at their installations, kings were expected to make some kind of dramatic gesture that marked a fundamental break with “the domestic order” and domestic morality. Usually this consisted of performing acts—murder, cannibalism, incest, the desecration of corpses—that would, had anyone else performed them, have been considered the most outrageous crimes. Sometimes such “exploits” were acted out symbolically: pretending to lie next to one's sister or stepping over one's father's body when taking the throne. At other times they were quite literal: kings actually would marry their sisters or massacre their close kin. Always, such acts marked the king as a kind of “sacred monster,” a figure effectively outside of morality (de Heusch 1972, 1982, 2000).

Marshall Sahlins (1981, 1983, 2007) has taken all this much further, pointing out, for one thing, that in the vast majority of kings, in all times and places, not only try to mark themselves as exterior to society, but actually claim to come from someplace other than the places they govern. Or at least to derive from ancestors who do. There is a sense almost everywhere that “society,” however conceived, is not self-sufficient; that power, creative energy—life, even—ultimately comes from outside. On the other hand, raw power needs to be domesti-

cated. In myth, this often leads to stories of wild, destructive young conquerors who arrive from faraway, only to be eventually tamed on marriage to “daughters of the land.” In rituals, it often leads to ceremonies in which the king is himself conquered by the people.

De Heusch’s concern was different. He was mainly interested in how, in African installation rituals, kings are effectively “torn from the everyday kinship order to take on the heavy responsibility of guaranteeing the equilibrium of the universe” (1997: 231). Kings do not begin as outsiders, they are made to “stand outside society.” But in contrast to Evans-Pritchard, he insisted this was not just a political responsibility. They stand outside society not just so they can represent it to itself, but so that they can represent it before the powers of nature. This is why, as he repeatedly emphasized, it is possible to have exactly the same rituals and beliefs surrounding actual rulers, largely powerless kings like the Shilluk *reth*, and “kings” who do not even pretend to rule over anything at all, but were simply individuals with an “enhanced moral status.”

Here, Frazer did indeed prove useful: especially because he began to map out a typology. In “The dying god” (Part III) Frazer described how kings can act as a kind of magical charm manufactured by the people, which de Heusch calls a “fetish body,” or “a living person whose mystical capacity is closely tied to the integrity of his physical being”<sup>1</sup> And while Frazer

---

<sup>1</sup> I am summarizing, not assessing, theories at this point so I will not enlarge on the fact that de Heusch seems to me to be working with a fundamentally mistaken idea of the nature of African fetishes, which are rarely embodiments of fertility but ordinarily embodiments of destructive forces (Graeber 2005). I think he is quite right and profoundly insightful when he argues that kings are often created by the same mechanisms as fetishes, as I have myself argued for Merina sovereigns (1996), mistaken when he goes on to claim that the key innovation here is that unlike fetishes the power of kings does not have to be constantly ritually maintained, since there are any number of counter-examples (e.g., Richards 1968).

many stories—discovering humans masquerading as animals and revealing their true nature, and turning them into Shilluk clans.

The latter is actually a curious element in the story. Godfrey Lienhardt (1952) insisted that unlike Nuer or Dinka heroes, who as ancestors, created their people as the fruit of their loins, Nyikang creates the Shilluk as an “intellectual” project. He discovers, transforms, gives names, grants roles and privileges, establishes boundaries, gathers together a diverse group of unrelated people and animals and makes them equal parts of a single social order. This is true, though putting it this way rather downplays the fact that he does so through right of conquest: that is, that he appears amidst a population of strangers who have never done anything to hurt him and threatens to kill them if they do not do his will.<sup>3</sup> It is not as if such behavior was considered acceptable behavior by ordinary people under ordinary circumstances. In most stories, the figure of Nyikang is saved from too close an association with unprovoked aggression by effectively being redoubled. He plays the largely intellectual role, solving problems, wielding magic, devising rules and status, while the sheer arbitrary violence is largely pushed off onto his son and alter ego, Dak. In the Shilluk heartland, especially, Nyikang is always described as “finding” people who fell from the skies or were living in the country or fishing in the river, and assigning them a place and a ritual task (to help

---

<sup>3</sup> I will return to this point later. Of course, one could argue that this sort of behavior was considered legitimate in dealing with strangers: Shilluk were notorious raiders, and were in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries apparently not above acts of treachery when dealing with Arabs or other foreigners in the “raiding country”—for instance, offering to ferry caravans across the Nile and then attacking, robbing or even massacring them. (At the same time foreigners who entered Shillukland itself were treated with scrupulous courtesy and guaranteed the safety of their persons and property.) Still, as we will see, ordinary Shilluk tended to rankle most of all at attempts to turn predatory violence into systematic power which is exactly what Nyikang was doing here.

one panics and runs away (Westermann 1912: 159; Oyler 1918b: 109; Hofmayr 1925: 16; Crazzolaro 1951: 123–127).

This is a crucial episode. While neither Nyikang or Dak are, at this point, kings (they are both later to become kings), the story is clearly a reference to the logic described by Simonse: that both king and people come into being through the arbitrary violence of the former, and the final, unified retaliation of the latter. At the same time it introduces the theme of effigies. Nyikang and Dak are, indeed, immortalized by effigies made of *ambatch* wood, kept in the famous shrine of Akurwa, north of Fashoda. These play a central role in the installation of a new *reth* and since Evans-Pritchard at least have been seen as representing the eternity of the royal office, as opposed to the ephemeral nature of any particular human embodiment. Here the first effigy is created literally as an attempt to cheat death. Even more, as we'll see, it seems to reflect a common theme whereby the people's anger and hostility—however paradoxically—becomes the immediate cause of the king's transcendence of mortal status.

To return to the story: Nyikang, Dak, and their small band of followers decide the time has come to move on and seek more amenable pastures. They have various adventures along the way. Here Dak serves as Nyikang's advance guard and general, often getting himself in scrapes from which Nyikang then has to rescue him. The most famous is his battle with the Sun, in which Nyikang again confirms his aquatic character. Dak is the first to pick a fight with the Sun, and at first, he and his father's followers are scorched by the Sun's terrible heat, forcing Nyikang to revive many by sprinkling water over them. In the end Nyikang manages to best the enemy by using water-soaked reeds to slash—and thus “burn”—the legs of the Sun, who is thus forced to retreat (Westermann 1912: 161, 166; Oyler 1918b: 113–114, Hofmayr 1925: 18, 55; see Lienhardt 1954: 149, Schnepel 1988: 448). Finally, he enters Shilluk-land, settles his followers, brings over existing inhabitants, even—in

might not have understood that such kings were seen as being created by the people, as de Heusch held, he was quite correct in holding that, having been so consecrated, their physical strength was tied to the prosperity of nature, and that's why they could not be allowed to grow sickly, frail, and old. In a later volume, “The scapegoat” (Part VI), Frazer discovered a second, equally important, but very different aspect of divine kingship: the king who absorbs the nation's sin and pollution, and is thus destroyed as a way of disposing of collective evil. The two are so different they would seem difficult to reconcile. Yet in a surprising number of cases (e.g., Quigley 2005) both seem to coexist.

Recently, it has been the scapegoat aspect of divine kingship that has received particular attention—largely because so many students of the institution (e.g., Makarius 1970, Scubla 2002) have been influenced by the “scapegoat theory” of French historian and literary critic Rene Girard—a theory which argues that hidden psychological scapegoat mechanisms lie at the root of all forms of myth, ritual, and ultimately, social life itself. Girard's is one of those arguments that seems on the face of it absurd—largely because it is; it is always absurd to argue that human social life can be reduced to one single mechanism, let alone a secret one—but somehow, despite that, contains at its core something that many serious scholars cannot help but find profoundly compelling. This seems to especially happen to when the argument sets out from the proposition that, despite appearances, all human society is really founded on some kind of fundamental violence. This is Girard's argument. Since we learn to desire by observing what others desire; we all want the same things; hence we are all in competition. The only way humans can avoid being thus plunged into a Hobbesian war of all against all is to direct their mutual hostility outwards, onto some kind of external object. And this is what we regularly do, selecting some arbitrary victim, who is first reviled as the cause of all their troubles and expelled from the commu-

nity, most often, by killing him. The most surprising element in Girard's argument is that this invariably leads to a kind of reversal: once the victim is killed, the former scapegoat is suddenly come to seen to us, not an embodiment of evil, but an exalted being, even a god, because he is now the embodiment of our ability to create human society by the very act of killing him. This mechanism he argues is the origin of all, and continues to lie at the heart of, all society and culture. The argument is, in classic Freudian style, circular: since we cannot face the reality, we are always denying it; therefore, it cannot possibly be disproved. Still, applying this model to the problem of divine kingship has interesting effects. Kings become, effectively, scapegoats in waiting (Muller 1980). Hence de Heusch's "exploits" are, for Girardians, actual crimes. They ensure that the king is, by definition, a criminal; hence it is always legitimate to execute him, should it come to that. His sacred pneuma, then, is anticipatory: the reflected glow of the role the king might ultimately play in embodying the unity of the people in finally destroying him.

Over the course of all of these debates the idea that such kings embody gods was gradually abandoned. De Heusch rejected the expression "divine kingship" entirely. Kings actually taken to be living gods are extraordinarily rare: the Egyptian Pharaoh may well have been the only entirely unambiguous example (Frankfort 1978).<sup>2</sup> Better to speak of "sacred kingship." These are legion. But sacred kings are not necessarily temporal rulers. They might be; but many are utterly powerless. Different functions—the king as fetish, the king as scapegoat, king as military commander or secular leader—can either be combined in the same figure or distributed across many; in any one community, any given one of them may or may not exist (de Heusch 1997).

---

<sup>2</sup> Though part of the problem of course is that it is not entirely clear what to "be" a god would even mean.

overcome the ravages of death (Hofmayr op cit, Oyler 1918b: 107–108, Westermann 1912: 167, Lienhardt 1979: 223).

Obviously, this is another version of the creation story: the loss of a blissful deathless paradise where people were nonetheless permanently infantilized by their dependence on higher powers (in this version, arguing over succession to the kingship when the king in fact will never die.) Even the digging stick reappears. This is a story of loss, but—as in so many versions of this myth—also a defiant declaration of independence. Nyikang's followers create a kind of autonomy by acquiring the means to reproduce their own life. Turning the symbol of death into an instrument of production is thus a perfect symbol.

Nyikang's first sojourn is at a place called Turra, where he marries the daughter of the local ruler Dimo and has a son, the rambunctious and unruly Dak. Conflicts soon develop, and there are a series of magical battles between Nyikang and his father-in-law, which Nyikang always wins. Dak grows up to become a scourge of the community, attacking and pillaging at will. Finally, the entire community joins together to kill him. They decide they will sneak up on him while he's relaxing outside playing his harp. According to Riad's informant "they were very afraid that Nyikang would avenge his son's death if only a few people murdered Dak, so they decided that all of them would spear him and his blood would be distributed upon all of them" (1959: 145). In other words, having been victims of arbitrary predatory violence, they adopt the same logic Simonse describes in the killing of sacred kings. "The people" as a whole must kill him. In this case, however, they do not succeed. Nyikang (or in some versions Dak) receives advance warning, and comes up with the idea of substituting an effigy made of a very light wood called *ambatch*, which he places in Dak's stead. The people come and one by one spear what they take to be the sleeping Dak. The next day, when the real, live Dak appears at what is supposed to be his own funeral, every-

continues to be revered as divinity inhabiting the Nile.<sup>2</sup> He is sometimes referred to as “child of the river.”

Originally Nyikang and his brother Duwat lived in a faraway land by a great lake or river in the south.

They speak of it as the end of the earth, or some call it the head of the earth... In that land death was not known. When a person became feeble through great age, he was thrown out in the cattle yard, or in the road near it, and the cows would trample him until he had been reduced to the size of an infant, and then he would grow to manhood again (Oyler 1918b: 107).

Other versions downplay this element—probably because the story that follows turns on a dispute over royal succession, and it is difficult to understand how this would come up if no one ever died. In some the people are divided over who to elect. In others, Nyikang is passed over in favor of his half-brother Duwat, seizes some royal regalia, and flees with his son Cal and a number of followers. Duwat follows in pursuit. In the end the two confront each other on either side of a great river. In some versions (Hofmayr 1910:328) Duwat curses his brother to die, thus bringing death into the world. In others, he simply curses him never to return. Always, though, the confrontation ends when Duwat throws a digging stick at his brother and tells him he can use it to dig the graves of his followers. Nyikang accepts the stick, but defiantly, announces he will use it as an agricultural implement, to give life, and that his people will thus grow food and raise children to

---

<sup>2</sup> Seligman (1931: 87–88) describes her as the embodiment of the totality of riverine creatures and phenomena, and notes that the priestesses who maintain royal shrines also maintain her cult. Offerings to her are left on the bank of the Nile. She is also the goddess of birth. When river creatures act in unusual ways, they are assumed to be acting as her vehicle; when land ones do the same they are assumed to be vehicles of Nyikang.

De Heusch’s ultimate conclusion is that A. M. Hocart (1927, 1933, 1936) was right: kingship was originally a ritual institution. Only later did it become something we would think of as political—that is, concerned with making decisions and enforcing them through the threat of force. As with any such statement, though, the obvious question is: what does “originally” mean here? Five thousand years ago when states first emerged in Egypt and Mesopotamia? And if so, why is that important? Or is the idea, instead, that whenever states emerge, it is invariably from within ritual institutions? This seems highly unlikely to be true in every case. Or is he simply saying that it is possible to have kings with ritual responsibilities and no political power, but not the other way around? If so it would appear to be a circular argument, since then it would only be those political figures who have ritual responsibilities whom the analyst is willing to dignify with the name of “king.”

It seems to me that de Heusch’s real accomplishment is to demonstrate that what we are used to thinking of as “government” (or maybe better, “governance”) is not a unitary phenomenon. Simonse (2005: 72) for instance observes that really, all most Africans ask of their sacred kings is what most Europeans demand of their welfare states: health, prosperity, a certain level of life security, protection from natural disasters.<sup>3</sup> He might have added: however, most do not feel it necessary or desirable to grant them police powers in order to accomplish this.

The question of governance, then, is not the same as the question of sovereignty. But what is sovereignty? Probably the

---

<sup>3</sup> Simonse’s comment has a particularly piquant irony when one considers the current popularity of the notion of “biopower”—the idea that modern states claim unique powers over life itself because they see themselves not just ruling over subjects, or citizens, but as administering the health and well-being of a biological population. Probably the question we should be asking is how it ever happened that there were governments that did *not* have such concerns.

most elegant definition is that recently proposed by Thomas Hansen and Finn Stepputat (2005, 2006): in its minimal sense, sovereignty is simply the recognition of the right to exercise violence with impunity. This is probably the reason why, as these same authors note, those arguing about the nature of sovereignty in the contemporary world—and particularly about the breakdown of states, the multiplication of new forms of semi-criminal sovereignty in the margins between them—rarely find the existing anthropological literature on sacred kingship particularly useful.<sup>4</sup>

This need not be so. Actually, the existing literature contains elements from which a relevant analysis could, quite easily, be constructed. It would have to begin with the notion of transcendence: the fact that in order to become the constitutive principle of society, a sovereign has to stand outside it. True, this is slightly different from what either Evans-Pritchard or de Heusch were proposing. Both are working essentially within the Durkheimian tradition that is mainly interested in the creation of a social order, how a group can only constitute itself as a group in relation to something that effectively stands outside it. The king is simply a particular example of those “sacred” objects through which profane society constitutes itself. Starting instead from the principle of sovereignty means beginning instead from the idea of moral order, and realities of violence. It then follows from the understanding that the various “exploits” or acts of transgression by which a king marks his break with

---

<sup>4</sup> I am simplifying their argument. Sovereign power for Hansen and Stepputat is marked not only by impunity but by a resultant transcendence—the “crucial marks of sovereign power” are “indivisibility, self-reference, and transcendence” (2005: 8), as well as a certain “excessive” quality. In many ways their argument, especially when it draws on that of Georges Bataille with his reflections on autonomy and violence, comes close to the one that I will be developing. But it is also exactly in this area that it deviates the most sharply, since Bataille’s position is ultimately profoundly reactionary, reading authoritarian political institutions back into the very nature of human desire. My position is more hopeful.

## The legend of Nyikang

The human condition, then, is one of irreparable loss and separation. We have gained the ability to grow our own food, but at the expense of hunger; we have gained sex and reproduction, but at the cost of death. We are being punished, but our punishment seems utterly disproportionate to our crimes. This is another element stressed by Lienhardt, and another way in which the Nilotic material resonates with the Abrahamic tradition. None of Lienhardt’s informants claimed to understand why wishing to have a little more food was such a terrible crime. It is our fate as humans to have no real understanding of our situation. If God is just, at the very least we do not understand in what way He is just; if it all makes sense, we cannot grasp quite how. It is possible that ultimately, there simply is no justice. When God is invoked, in Nilotic languages—including Shilluk—it is ordinarily as an exclamation, “Why, God?,” above all when a loved one falls sick, with the assumption that no answer will ever be forthcoming.

Now, the Shilluk appear to be one of the few Nilotic peoples for whom such creation myths are not particularly important. The Shilluk past begins, instead, with an historical event: the exile of Nyikang from his original home. Still, one story is quite clearly a transposition of the other. Nyikang himself is the son of a king whose father descended from Heaven.<sup>1</sup> His mother Nyakaya was a crocodile, or perhaps part crocodile: she

---

<sup>1</sup> In other versions, he traces back to a white or grey cow, created by God in the Nile.



violence: or to be more explicit, through killing, blood, heat, fire, and the division of once-living flesh.

There is one way that Divinity enters the world that is not disastrous. This is rain. Rain—and water more generally—seen as a nurturant, essentially feminine principle, is often also treated as the only element through which humans can still experience some approximation of that primal unity. This is quite explicit in the southeastern societies studied by Simonse. The ancestors of rainmaking lines were often said to have emerged from rivers, only to be discovered by children minding cattle on the shore; in rituals, they recreated the vines that originally connected heaven and earth; they embody peace, coolness, fertilizing water (1994: 409–411). Hence during important rain-making rituals, communities must maintain a state of “peace” (*edwar*). Physical violence, drumming, shouting, drunkenness, dancing are all forbidden; even animals sacrificed in rain ceremonies had to be smothered, so no blood was spilled, and they had to be imagined to go to their deaths voluntarily, without resistance. The state was ended with a bloody sacrifice at the end of the agricultural season. *Edwar* though this was simply an exaggerated version of the normal mode of comportment with the community—within human, social space—since even ordinarily, hot, bloody, violent activity was exiled to the surrounding wilderness. This was true of hunting and war but it was also true of childbirth (the paradigm of traumatic separation): women in labor were expected to resort to the bush, and, like returning hunters or warriors, had to be purified from the blood spilled before returning to their communities (1994: 412–416).

ordinary morality are not normally seen to make him immoral, but a creature beyond morality. As such he can be treated as the constituent principle of a system of justice or morality—since, logically, no creature capable of creating a system of justice can itself be already bound by the system he creates. Let me appeal to one famous example here. European visitors to the court of King Mutesa of the Ganda kingdom would occasionally try to impress him by presenting him with some new state-of-the-art rifle; he would generally respond by testing the rifle out by randomly picking off one or two of his subjects on the street. Clearly this was a calculated political gesture; the Europeans were trying to make a point of their superior firepower, Mutesa responded by demonstrating his own absolute power within his own domains. But Ganda kings were notorious for arbitrary, even random violence against their own subjects. This however did not prevent Mutesa from also being accepted as supreme judge and guardian of the state’s system of justice. Instead, such random acts of violence confirmed in him in a status similar to that often (in Africa) attributed to God, who is seen simultaneously as an utterly random force throwing lightning and striking down mortals for no apparent reason, and as the very embodiment of justice and protector of the weak.

This, I would argue, is the aspect of African kingship which can legitimately be labeled “divine.” Such creatures transcend all ordinary limitations. Whether they were said to embody a god is not the issue.<sup>5</sup> The point is that they *act* like gods—or even God—and get away with it.

For all that European and American observers ordinarily professed horror at behavior like Mutesa’s, this divine aspect

---

<sup>5</sup> The Ganda kingship, for example, was almost entirely secular. Not only are we not dealing with a “divine king,” in the sense of one identified with supernatural beings, we are not even dealing with a particularly sacred one—except insofar as any king is, simply by virtue of hierarchical position, by definition sacred.

is the one that is echoed in the modern nation-state. Walter Benjamin posed the dilemma quite nicely in his famous distinction between “law-making” and “law-maintaining” violence. Really it is exactly the same paradox, cast in the new language that became necessary once the power of kings (“sovereignty”) had been transferred, at least in principle, to an entity referred to as “the people”—even though the exact way in which “the people” were to exercise sovereignty was never clear. No constitutional order can constitute itself. We like to say that “no one is above the law” but if this were really true laws would not exist to begin with: even the writers of the United State constitution or founders of the French Republic were, after all, guilty of treason according to the legal regimes under which they had been born. The legitimacy of any legal order therefore ultimately rests on illegal acts—usually, acts of illegal violence. Whether one embraces the Left solution (that “the people” periodically rise up to exercise their sovereignty through revolutions) or the Right solution (that heads of state can exercise sovereignty in their ability to set the legal order aside) the paradox itself remains. In practical terms, it translates into a constant political dilemma. How does one distinguish “the people” from a mere unruly mob? How does one know if the hand suspending habeas corpus is that of a contemporary Abraham Lincoln, or of a contemporary Mussolini?

What I am proposing here is that this paradox has always been with us. Obviously, any thug or bandit who finds he can regularly get away with raping, killing, and plundering at random will not, simply by that fact, come to be seen as a power capable of constituting a moral order or national identity.<sup>6</sup> The overwhelming majority of those who find themselves in such a situation never think to make such claims—except perhaps

---

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin himself suggested that popular fascination with the “great criminal” who “makes his own law” derives from precisely this recognition.

misery, work, or death. God gave us what we needed. Then the connection was destroyed.

Stories like this can be termed “Hesiodic” because, like Hesiod’s Prometheus story (or for that matter, the story of the Garden of Eden) they begin with blissful dependency—humans being supplied whatever they need from a benevolent creator—to an unhappy autonomy, in which humans eventually win for themselves everything they will need to grow and cook food, bear and raise children, and otherwise reproduce their own existence, but at a terrible cost. It does not take a lot of imagination to see these as first and foremost as metaphors of birth, the loss of the blissful dependency of the womb, which the cutting of the cord, in the Nilotic versions, simply makes unusually explicit.

The problem is that once separation is introduced into the world, conjunction can only mean catastrophe. In the current state of things, when Divinity—as an absolute, universal principle—manifests itself in our lives, it can only take the form of floods, plagues, lightning, locusts, murrains. Natural disasters are, after all, indiscriminate; they effect everyone; thus, like the indiscriminate violence of divine kings, they can represent the principle of universality. But if God is the annihilation of difference, then sacrifice—in Nilotic society the archetypal ritual—is its recreation.

The slaughter and division of an animal becomes a reenactment of the primal act of creation through separation; it becomes a way of expelling the divine element from some disastrous entanglement in human affairs and reestablishing everything in its proper sphere again.<sup>2</sup> This is accomplished through

---

<sup>2</sup> So too, incidentally, with Vedic sacrifice, which reproduces the original creation of the world through the division of the body of a primordial being, or Greek sacrifice, which constantly recreated the divisions between gods, animals, and mortals, and so. All these religious traditions appear to be historically related.

granted one grain of millet a day to the first man and woman, and thus satisfied their needs. They were forbidden to grow or pound more.

The first human beings, usually called Garang and Abuk, living on earth had to take care when they were doing their little planting or pounding, lest a hoe or pestle should strike Divinity, but one day the woman 'because she was greedy' (in this context any Dinka would view her 'greed' indulgently) decided to plant (or pound) more than the permitted grain of millet. In order to do so she took one of the long-handled hoes (or pestles) which the Dinka now use. In raising this pole to pound or cultivate, she struck Divinity who withdrew, offended, to his present great distance from the earth, and sent a small blue bird (the colour of the sky) called atoc to sever the rope which had previously given men access to the sky and to him. Since that time the country has been 'spoilt,' for men have to labour for the food they need, and are often hungry. They can no longer as before freely reach Divinity, and they suffer sickness and death, which thus accompany their abrupt separation from Divinity (Iienhardt 1961: 33–34).

In some versions, human reproduction and death are introduced simultaneously: the woman needs to pound more grain specifically because she bears children and needs to feed her growing family. Always, the story begins with the rupture of an original unity. Once, heaven and earth were right next to each other, humans could move back and forth between them. Or: there was a rope, or tree, or vine, or some other means of passage between the two. As a result, people lived without

among their immediate henchmen. The overwhelming majority of those who do try fail. Yet the potential is always there. Successful thugs do become sovereigns, even, creators of new legal and moral systems. And genuine "sovereignty" does always carry with it the potential for arbitrary violence. This is true even in contemporary welfare states: apparently this is the one aspect that, despite liberal hopes, can never be completely reformed away. It is precisely in this that sovereigns resemble gods and that kingship can properly be called "divine."

This is not to say that Evans-Pritchard was wrong to say that kings are also always sacred. Rather, I think this perspective allows us to see that the mechanics of sacred kingship—turning the king into a fetish or a scapegoat—often operate (whatever their immediate intentions) as a means of controlling the obvious dangers of rulers who feel they can act like arbitrary, petulant gods. Sahlins' emphasis on the way Stranger Kings must be domesticated, encompassed and thus tamed by the people is a classic case in point. It is by such means that divine kings are rendered merely sacred. In the absence of a strong state apparatus, the situation of power is often fluid and tenuous: the same act that at one point marks a monarch as a transcendent force beyond morality can, if the balance of forces shift, be reinterpreted as simple criminality. Thus can divine kings be made into scapegoats.

There is every reason to believe this applies to the Shilluk king (or *reth*) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well. Consider the following two stories, preserved in Westermann (and bearing in mind that while there is no way to know if these incidents ever actually happened, it doesn't really matter, since the repetition of stories constitutes the very stuff of politics):

Story 1: one day a man named ogam was fishing with a member of the royal family named Nyadwai. He caught a choice fish and the prince

demanded he turn it over, but he refused. Later, when his fellow villagers suggested this was unwise, he pointed out there were dozens of princes, and belittled Nyadwai: ‘who would ever elect him king?’

Some years later, he learned Nyadwai had indeed been elected king. Sure enough he was summoned to court but the king’s behavior appeared to make a point of rising above the matter. “The king gave him cattle; built him a village; he married a woman, and his village became large; he had many children.”

Then one day, many years later, the King destroyed the village and killed them all (Wester-mann 1912: 141)

Here, we have an example of a king trying to play god in every sense of the term. Such a king appears arbitrary, vindictive, all-powerful in an almost Biblical sense. If one examines it in the context of Shilluk institutions, however, it begins to look rather different. ordinarily, Shilluk kings did not even have the power to appoint or remove village chiefs. In the complete absence of any sort of administrative apparatus, their power was almost entirely personal: Nyadwai created and destroyed Ogam’s village using his own personal resources, his own herd of cattle, his own personal band of retainers. If he had tried to exterminate the lineage of a real village chief, not one he had himself created, he would likely have found himself in a very serious trouble. What’s more, a *reth*’s power in fact was almost entirely dependent on his physical presence:

Story 2: There was once a cruel king, who killed many of his subjects, “he even killed women.” His subjects were terrified of him. Then one day, to demonstrate that his subjects were so afraid they

## A word on Nilotic cosmologies

In order to understand the famous Shilluk installation rituals we must first examine their mythic framework. This is somewhat difficult, since as almost all early observers point out, their Shilluk informants—much unlike their Nuer and Dinka equivalents—were not much given to cosmological speculation. Instead, everything was transposed onto the level of historical epic. Still, in either case, it would seem the same themes were working themselves, so it seems best to begin by looking at Nilotic cosmologies more generally.

Nilotic societies normally treat God as a force profoundly distant and removed from the human world. Divinity itself is rendered little or no cult; at least not directly. Instead Divinity is usually seen to be “refracted” through the cosmos, immanent particularly in storms, totemic spirits, numinous objects, or anything inexplicable and extraordinary. In one sense, then, God is everywhere. In another, he is profoundly absent. Creation stories almost invariably begin with a traumatic separation. Here is one typical, Dinka version.<sup>1</sup>

Divinity (and the sky) and men (and the earth) were originally contiguous; the sky then lay just above the earth. They were connected by a rope... By means of this rope men could clamber at will to Divinity. At this time there was no death. Divinity

---

<sup>1</sup> One anomalous element has been eliminated: in this version the cord ran parallel to the earth; in most, it is arranged vertically.

## Mytho-history

would do anything he asked, he assembled the Shilluk chiefs and ordered them to wall him up inside a house with a young girl. Then he ordered them to let him out again. They didn't. So he died (Westermann 1912: 175).<sup>7</sup>

The story might even serve as a story of the origin of ritual regicide, though it isn't explicitly presented as such, since this was precisely the way kings were said to have originally been put to death. They were walled in a hut with a young maiden. (The custom was discontinued, it was said, when once the maiden died first, and the king complained so loudly about the stink that they agreed from then on to smother him: Seligman 1911: 222, 1932: 91–92, Westermann 1912: 136, Hofmayr 1925: 300).

Stories like these help explain a peculiar confusion in the literature on Shilluk kingship. Nineteenth century travelers, and many twentieth century observers, insisted the *reth* was an absolute despot wielding complete and arbitrary power over his subjects. Others—most famously Evans-Pritchard (1948)—insisted that he was for most effective purposes a mere symbolic figurehead who “reigned but did not govern,” and had almost no systematic way to impose his will on ordinary Shilluk. Both were right. As divine king, *reths* were expected to make displays of absolute, arbitrary violence, but the means they had at their disposal were extremely limited, and most of all, they found themselves checked and stymied whenever they tried to transform those displays into the basis for any sort of systematic power. True, as elsewhere, these displays of arbitrariness were, however paradoxically, seen as closely tied to the *reth*'s ability to dispense justice: nineteenth century *reths* could spend days on end hearing legal cases, even if, under ordinary

---

<sup>7</sup> Though we should probably make note of the denouement: they elected a new king, who promptly accused them of murder and killed them all.

circumstances, they were lacking in the means to enforce decisions and appear to have acted primarily as mediators.

Writing in the 1940s, at a time when displays of arbitrary violence on the part of a *reth* would certainly have been treated as criminal by colonial police, and when the royal office had become a focus for Shilluk national identity and resistance, Evans-Pritchard had every reason to downplay such stories of brutality.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless they are crucial; not only for the reasons already mentioned, but also, because under ordinary circumstances, the arbitrary violence of the king actually seems central in constituting that sense of national identity itself. To understand this, though, we must turn to another part of Sudan during a more recent period during which the police have largely ceased to function.

---

<sup>8</sup> In a broader sense, he was doubtless aware that the colonial perception of Africa as a place of arbitrary violence and savagery had done much greater violence to Africans—that is, justified much worse atrocities—than any African king had ever done. This is the reason most contemporary Africanists tend to avoid these stories. But it seems to me there's nothing to be gained by covering things up: especially since the actual arbitrary violence performed by most African kings was in fact, negligible or even completely imaginary (what mattered were the stories), and even those who even came close to living up to Euro-American stereotypes, like Shaka or Mutesa, killed far fewer of their own subjects than most European kings during the period before they became figureheads.

probably reinvented, and royal institutions, along with the figure of Nyikang, became if anything even more important as symbols of national identity—as indeed, they remain to the present day.

Today, the position of the *reth* remains, but, like the Shilluk themselves, just barely. The tiny Shilluk kingdom has been in recent decades unfortunate enough to be located precisely on the front-lines of the Sudanese civil war. ordinary Shilluk have been victims of massacres, famines, massive out-migration, and forced assimilation, to the extent that by the end of the war some were arguing there is a real danger of cultural or even physical extinction (e.g., Nyaba 2006). The peace settlement of 2005 has helped end the immediate existential crisis, but by no means brought the Shilluks' troubles to an end (Johnson 2011).

Shilluk tradition of guaranteeing the safety of foreigners. Before long there were thousands of the latter, living in a cluster of communities around Kaka in the far north. *Reths* responded by creating new trade monopolies, imposing systematic taxes, and trying to create a royal monopoly on firearms.<sup>10</sup> They do not appear to have been entirely unsuccessful. Foreign visitors at the time certainly came away under the impression they had been dealing with a bona fide monarch, with at least an embryonic administration. At the same time, some also reported northerners openly complaining it would be better to live without a *reth* entirely (Mercer 1974: 423–24).

The situation ended catastrophically. As the ivory trade was replaced by the slave trade, northern Shilluk increasingly signed up as auxiliaries in Arab raids on the Dinka; by 1861, a foreign freebooter named Mohammed Kheir thus managed to spark a civil war that allowed them to sack Fashoda and carry out devastating slave raids against the Shilluk heartland itself (Udall 1998: 474–82; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1982: 43–46). The sack of Fashoda was followed by some forty years of almost continual warfare. The north battled the south; foreign powers (first the Ottoman regime, then the Mahdist regime in Khartoum, then finally the British) intervened trying to establish client governments; several *reths* were executed as rebels against one side or the other; Shilluk herds were decimated and the carnage was such that the population fell by almost half. In 1899 British rule was established, Shilluk territory restricted and those outside it resettled, and the *reth* reduced to the usual tax-collector and administer of local justice under a system of indirect colonial rule. At the same time, the royal installation ritual, which had fallen into abeyance during the civil wars, was revived and

---

<sup>10</sup> Already in the 1840s foreign sources begin speaking of an annual tribute in cattle and grain, sometimes estimated at 10% (Frost 1974: 176). This seems however to have only been an early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon.

## The Shilluk as seen from Equattoria

Here let me turn to the work of Dutch anthropologist Simon Simonse on rainmakers among a belt of peoples (the Bari, Pari, Lulubo, Lotuho, Lokoya, among others) in the furthest southern Sudan. Rainmakers are important figures throughout the area but their status varies considerably. Some have (at one time or another) managed to make themselves into powerful rulers; others remain marginal figures. All of them are liable to be held accountable in the event that (as often happens in the southern Sudan) rain does not fall. In fact, Simonse, and his colleague, Japanese anthropologist Eisei Kurimoto, are perhaps unique among anthropologists in being in the vicinity when events of this kind actually happened.<sup>1</sup>

What Simonse describes (reviewing over two dozen case studies of historically documented king-killings) is a kind of tragic drama, in which the rainmaker and people come to gradually define themselves against one another. If rains are delayed, the people (led by the chief warrior age grade) will petition the rainmaker, make gifts, rebuild his residence or put back into effect taxes or customs that have fallen into abeyance so as to win back his favor. If the rain continues not to fall, things become tense. The rainmaker is increasingly assumed to be withholding the rains, and perhaps unleashing other

---

<sup>1</sup> If nothing else one can say the question “do they really kill their kings” can be said to be definitively settled: though, at the same time, it is also clear that it is the least powerful of these figures who are the most likely to fall victim.

natural disasters, out of spite. The rainmaker will attempt stalling techniques (blaming others, sacrificial rituals, false confessions); the young men's age set will begin to rally more and more constituencies against the king to the point where finally, the king must either flee, or confront a community entirely united against him. The methods of killing kings, Simonse notes, tend to take on the gruesome forms they do—beatings to death, burials alive—because these are ways in which everyone could be said to have been equally responsible. It is the community as a whole that must kill the king. Indeed, it only becomes a unified community—"the people" properly speaking—in doing so: since the creation and dispatching of rainmakers is about the only form of collective action in which everyone participates. All this is, perhaps, what a Girardian would predict, except that, far from being solemn sacrificial rituals with willing victims that Girard describes, king-killing more often resembled lynch-mobs, and rainmakers fought back with every means at their disposal. Often in fact we hear of one lonely armed rainmaker holding off an entire incensed population. During a famine between 1855 and 1859, one Bari king who had acquired a rifle used it on three separate occasions to disperse crowds assembled to kill him. A French traveler in the 1860s was later told:

We asked Nyiggilo to give us rain. He made promises and demanded cattle as a payment. Despite his spells the rain did not come. So we got angry. Then Nyiggilo took his rifle and threatened to kill everybody. We had to leave him be. Last year the same thing happened for a third time: then we lost patience. We slit Nyiggilo's stomach open and threw him into the river: he will no longer make fun of us (in Simonse 1992: 204).

It is easy to see why rainmakers might wish to acquire a monopoly on firearms, or to develop a loyal personal

Insofar as royal power became more than a sporadic phenomenon; insofar as it came to embed itself in everyday life, it was, apparently, largely through the agency of the *bareth* and their network of royal shrines, spread throughout Shillukland. Here, though, the effects could hardly be overestimated. The figure of Nyikang, the mythic founder of the nation, came to dominate every aspect of ritual life, and to become the very ground of Shilluk social being. Where other Nilotic societies are famous for their theological speculation, with sacrifice—the primary ritual—always being directed to God and attendant cosmic spirits, here, everything came to be centered on the "cult of Nyikang." This was true to such a degree that by the time Seligman was writing (1911, 1932), he found it difficult to establish what Shilluk ideas about God or lineage ancestors even were. To give some sense of the royal spirits' pervasiveness: while Nuer and Dinka who fell ill typically attributed their condition to attack by "air spirits," and sought cures from mediums possessed by such spirits, most Shilluk appear to have assumed they were being attacked by former kings—most often, Nyikang's aggressive son Dak—and sought the aid of mediums possessed by Nyikang himself (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 101–102). While most ordinary Shilluk, as we shall see, assiduously avoided the affairs of living royalty, dead ones soon came to intervene in almost every aspect of their daily lives.

The obvious question is how long it took for this to happen. Here, information is simply unavailable. All we know is that the figure of Nyikang gradually came to dominate every aspect of Shilluk life. The political situation in turn appears to have stabilized by 1700 and remained so for at least a century. By the 1820s however the Ottoman state began attempting to establish its authority in the region, and this coincided with a sharp increase in the demand for ivory on the world market. Arab merchants and political refugees began to establish themselves in the north of the country. Nyidok (1845–1863) refused to receive official Ottoman envoys, but he kept up the



ultimately order to the death of the king. A *reth* as said to be put to death when his physical powers began to fade—purportedly, when his wives announced that he is no longer capable of satisfying them sexually (Seligman 1911: 222; Howell and Thomson 1946: 10). In some accounts (e.g., Westermann 1912: 136) the execution is carried out by the royal wives themselves.<sup>8</sup> one may argue about the degree to which this whole scenario is simply an ideological facade, but it clearly happened sometimes: Hofmayr for instance writes of one king's affection for his mother, "who had killed his father with a blow from a brass-ring" (1925: 127, in Frost 1974: 82).

I should emphasize that Shilluk society as a whole was in no sense a matriarchy. Women held extraordinary power within the royal apparatus, but that apparatus was not in itself particularly powerful. The fact that the Queen could render judicial judgments, for instance, is less impressive when one knows royal judgments were not usually enforced. Governance of day-to-day affairs seems to have rested firmly in the hands of commoner male settlement chiefs, who were also in charge of electing a new king when the old one died. Village women also elected female chiefs who had jurisdiction over women's affairs but these were much less important.<sup>9</sup> Property was passed in the male line. The *reth* himself continued to exercise predatory and sometimes brutal power through his personal retainers, occasionally raiding his own people as a mode of intervening in local politics. Nonetheless, that (divine, arbitrary) power seems to have been increasingly contained within a ritual apparatus where royal women played the central political role.

---

<sup>8</sup> Seligman and Seligman (1932: 91) say there were two versions of how this happens: in one, the wives strangle the king themselves, in the other, they lay a white cloth across his face and knees as he lies asleep in the afternoon to indicate their judgment to the male Ororo who actually kill him.

<sup>9</sup> Oyler says they acted as "magistrates" but their jurisdiction was limited to disputes between women (1926: 65–66).

entourage. In fact Simonsen argues that, throughout the region, when state-like forms did emerge, it was typically when rainmakers, caught in an endless and very dangerous game of bluffing and brinksmanship with their constituents, successfully sought means to reinforce their position: by intermarrying with neighboring kings, allying themselves with foreign traders, establishing trade and craft monopolies, building up a permanent armed following, and so on (2001: 94–97).

In such polities "the people," insofar as such an entity could be said to have existed, was seen essentially as the king's collective enemy. Simonsen (1992: 193–195) records several striking instances of European explorers encountering kings in the region who urged them to open fire into crowds or to carry out raids against enemy villages, only to discover that the "enemies" in question were really their own subjects. In other words, kings often really would take on the role attributed to them in rain dramas: of spitefully unleashing arbitrary destruction on the people they were supposed to protect.

Simonsen compares the opposition between king and people with the segmentary opposition between lineages or clans described by Evans-Pritchard among the Nuer (Simonsen 1992: 27–30), each side defining itself, coming into being really, through opposition to the other. This opposition is necessarily expressed by at least the potential for violence. It might seem strange to propose a segmentary opposition between one person and everybody else, but if one returns to Evans-Pritchard's actual analysis (1940), it makes a certain degree of sense. Evans-Pritchard stressed that in a feud, when clan or lineage A sought to avenge itself on clan or lineage B, any member of lineage B was fair game. They were treated, for political purposes, as identical. In fact, this was Evans-Pritchard's definition of a "political" group—one whose members were treated as interchangeable in relation to

outsiders.<sup>2</sup> If so, the arbitrary violence of divine kings—firing randomly into crowds, bringing down natural disasters—is the perfect concrete expression of what makes a people a people—an undifferentiated, therefore political group. All of these peoples—Bari, Pari, Lolubo, etc—became peoples only in relation to some particularly powerful rainmaker; and owing to the rise and fall of reputations, political boundaries were always in flux.

Simonse’s analysis strikes me as important. True, in the end, he does appear to fall into a Girardian framework (probably unavoidably, considering his material), seeing scapegoat dramas as the primordial truth behind all politics. So he can say that ritual king-killing of the Shilluk variety is best seen a kind of compromise, an attempt to head off the constant, unstable drama between king and people by institutionalizing the practice,<sup>3</sup> while the state, with its monopoly on force, is an attempt to eliminate the drama entirely (Simonse 2004). Myself, I would prefer to see the kind of violence he describes not as revealing of the essential nature of society, but of the essential nature of a certain form of political power with cosmic pretensions—one by no means inevitable, but which is very much still with us.

---

<sup>2</sup> So today: an American citizen might be so little regarded by his own government that she is kicked out of hospitals while seriously ill or left to starve on the street; if, however, she then goes on to be killed by the agent of a foreign government, an American has been killed and it will be considered cause for war.

<sup>3</sup> It’s also important to note here that, as Schnepel emphasizes (1991: 58), the Shilluk king was not himself a rainmaker: rather, he interceded on the part of his subjects with Nyikang, who was responsible for the rains.

strife went on to found their own branches of the royal lineage, whose numbers, as Queen Abudok predicted, tended to continually increase over the course of Shilluk history as a result.

- Royal daughters remained in their mothers’ villages. They were referred to as “Little Queen” and “their council sought on all matters of importance” (Driberg 1932: 420). They are not supposed to marry or have children, but in historical times at least, they became notorious for taking lovers as they wished—then, if they became pregnant, demanding hefty payments in cattle from them to hush the matter up (Howell 1953b: 107–108).<sup>6</sup>
- Princesses might also be appointed as governors over local districts (Hofmayr 1925: 71; Jackson in Frost 1974: 133–134), particularly if their brothers became king.
- Royal wives who had borne three children, and royal widows, would retire to their natal villages to become *bareth*, or guardians of royal shrines (Seligman 1932: 77–78). It was through these shrines that the “cult of Nyikang” was disseminated.<sup>7</sup> These women of course also became key political conduits between commoner chiefs and the royal court.
- While as noted above it was considered quite outrageous for a king to kill a woman, royal wives were expected to

---

<sup>6</sup> They, not the fathers, remained in control of the offspring of such unions. Colonial sources (Seligman 1911: 218, Howell 1953b: 107–108) insisted that in the past, princesses who bore children would be executed along with the child’s father,

<sup>7</sup> Another key medium for the spread of the cult of Nyikang appears to have been mediums loosely attached to the shrines, who had usually had no previous attachment to the court. According to Oyler (1918a: 288) these too were mainly women.

was, effectively, a kind of political compromise between male princes, royal women, and commoner chiefs—one that ensured no woman ever again attempted to take the highest office, but otherwise, granted royal women an extraordinary degree of power.

Let me outline just what an important role Shilluk royal women continued to play:

- Where most African kings lived surrounded by a hierarchy of male officials, these were entirely absent from Fashoda. The *reth* lived surrounded only by his wives, who could number as many as a hundred, each with her own dwelling. No other men were allowed to set foot in the settlement after nightfall (Riad 1959: 197). Since members of the royal clan could not marry each other (this would be incest) these wives were uniformly commoners.
- The king's senior wife seems to have acted as his chief minister, and had the power to hold court, and decide legal cases, in the *reth*'s absence (Driberg 1932: 420). She was also responsible for recruiting and supervising secondary wives.
- In the absence of any administrative apparatus, royal women also appear to have become the key intermediaries between Fashoda and other communities.
  - Royal wives who became pregnant returned in their sixth month to their natal villages where their children were born and raised. They were as the saying goes “planted out” and allied themselves with a local commoner chief (Pumphreys 1941: 11) who became the patron of the young prince or princess. Those sons who were not eventually either elected to the throne or killed in internecine

## Three propositions

The core of my argument in this essay boils down to three propositions, and it might be best to lay them out straightaway, before returning to the Shilluk material in more detail. The first proposition I have already outlined; the second is broadly inspired by the ongoing work of Marshall Sahlins on comparative cosmologies; the third might be considered my own extrapolation from Simonse:

1. *Divine kingship*, insofar as the term can be made meaningful, refers not to the identification of rulers with supernatural beings (a surprisingly rare phenomenon),<sup>1</sup> but to *kings who make themselves the equivalent of gods*—arbitrary, all-powerful beings beyond human morality—through the use of arbitrary violence. The institutions of sacred kingship, whatever their origins, have typically been used to head off or control the danger of such forms of power. A direct line can be traced from such divine kingship to contemporary forms of sovereignty.
2. *Sacred kingship* can also be conceived as offering a kind of (tentative, imperfect) *resolution for the elementary*

---

<sup>1</sup> As I mentioned earlier, the Egyptian Pharaoh may be the only example. Another is the Nepali king. But the latter case makes clear that identification with a deity is not in itself, necessarily, an indicator of divine kingship in my sense of the term. The Nepali king is identified with Vishnu, but this identification either originated or only came to be emphasized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the king lost most of his power to the Prime Ministers; it was, in fact, the token of what I've been calling sacred kingship, in which the king became too “set apart” from the world to actually govern.

*problematic of human existence* proposed in creation narratives.

It is in this sense that Clastres (1977) was right when he said that state authority must have emerged from prophets rather than chiefs, from the desire to find a “land without evil” and undo death; it is in this sense, too, that it can be said that Christ (the Redeemer) was a king, or kings could so easily model themselves on Christ, despite his obvious lack of martial qualities. Here, in embryo, can we observe what I have called the utopian element of the state.

3. *Violence*, and more specifically, antagonism, plays a crucial role here. It is the peculiar quality of violence that it simplifies things, draws clear lines where otherwise one might see only complex and overlapping networks of human relationship. It is the particular quality of *sovereign violence* that it *defines its subjects as a single people*.

This is, in the case of kingdoms, actually prior to the friend/enemy distinction proposed by Karl Schmitt. or, to be more specific, one’s ability to constitute oneself as a single people in a potential relation of war with other peoples, is premised on a prior but usually hidden state of war *between the sovereign and the people*.

The Shilluk kingdom then seems to be especially revealing in all three of these areas, not, as I say, because it represents some primordial form of monarchy, but because, in Shilluk rulers’ attempts to build something like a state in the absence of any real administrative apparatus, these mechanisms become unusually transparent. I also suspect the reality behind divine kingship is also particularly easy to make out here because the particular nature of Nilotic cosmology: most of all, Nilotic conceptions of God, who manifests himself in mortal life almost exclusively through disaster. One consequence is a peculiar relation between the transcendent and utopian elements, where it is the

Fashoda, in turn, became a settlement composed almost entirely of women.

We do know that at the time Shilluk divine kingship took shape, the status of women, or at least that of royal woman, was a much contested political issue. Tugo’s reign was in fact preceded by that of a female *reth*, one Queen Abudok, Tokot’s sister.<sup>5</sup> According to Westermann’s account (1912: 149–50), Abudok came to power and ruled for some years, but eventually Shilluk chiefs took umbrage at being ruled by a woman, and demanded she step down. She concurred, naming Tugo, then a young man in her care, as her successor. Later, according to the story, she appeared in Fashoda with a bag of lily seeds, strewing them about as she announced that henceforth, the royal lineage would grow larger and larger and scatter across the country like those seeds, until it engulfed the country entirely. Abudok’s act is usually interpreted as a spiteful prophecy, but one could just as easily read it as a story about the foundation of Fashoda itself, and the creation of the system of divine kingship usually attributed to her former ward, Tugo. Was it really Abudok who designed these institutions, perhaps when she placed Tugo on the throne to begin with? We cannot know. But certainly the common wisdom, that these institutions were purely the brainchild of Tugo himself seems implausible. It is very difficult to imagine a king who decided on his own accord to deny himself the right to name his own successor, or to grant his own wives the right to have him executed. If nothing else, we can certainly say that the system that emerged

---

<sup>5</sup> Actually, it is not entirely clear when Abudok ruled. Some genealogies leave her out entirely. Hofmayr places her before Tokot, and this has become the generally accepted version. Westermann (1912: 149–50) is ambiguous but seems to agree; however, his version also seems to make her the founder of Fashoda, which should place her closer to the time of Tugo, and elsewhere, in his list of kings (on page 135) he places Abudok after Tokot. Crazzolara (1950: 136n4) insists that she ruled after Tokot, as regent while Tugo was still a child.

on the figure of Nyikang—probably at that time just the mythic ancestor of some local chiefly line—and transforming him into a legendary hero around which to rally a Shilluk nation that was, effectively, created by his doing so. Most contemporary historians have now come around to his position.

Actually, we are only beginning to understand the full significance of what happened in a larger region context. The Shilluk kingdom was just one among many, and there appears to have been an ongoing alliance, perhaps from quite early on, between the Shilluk and the powerful Funj Sultanate of Sennar, not far to the north (Spaulding 2007). It is possible that at least some of these ideas on which Shilluk sacral kingship were originally pioneered by the Funj, originally refugees displaced by the Shilluk themselves, but who gradually created a rich synthesis of Nubian, Christian, and Islamic cultural elements.<sup>3</sup> Much historical work still needs to be done. Nonetheless, the precise origin of these ideas is not what's most important. What's important is why they were adopted. Here, the one thing that's most clear from reading the Shilluk's own accounts is that what happened represented a kind of gender revolution. It is important to bear in mind here that in most Nilotic societies matters of war (hence politics) are organized through male age-sets. Presumably this must have once been true here as well, but over time, their Shilluk equivalents have been comparatively marginalized (Howell 1941: 56–66).<sup>4</sup> Instead, political life came to be organized around the *reth* in Fashoda, and

---

<sup>3</sup> According to Spaulding (2006) the Funj, who were not Nilotic, both practiced ritual king-killing, and a similar marriage pattern, whereby royal wives moved back in such a way as to become the conduits between the capital and villages.

<sup>4</sup> Among the eastern Nilotic societies considered by Simonse, the chief warrior age set was also responsible for representing the people against, and ultimately, if necessary, killing the king. Among the Shilluk this role seems to have been passed to royal women.

hostility of the people that makes the king a transcendent being capable of offering a kind of resolution to the dilemmas of mortal life. Be this as it may, I will spend the rest of this essay examining how these three principles—divine kingship, sacred kingship, and sovereign violence—came together in the historical Shilluk kingdom, in its stories of mythic origin and in its royal ritual, before returning to make a final brief reflection on their wider implications.

## A brief outline of Shilluk history

The Shilluk are something of an anomaly among Nilotic people. Most Nilotes are semi-nomadic pastoralists, for whom agriculture was very much a secondary occupation, famed for their fierce egalitarianism, whose social life revolves largely around their herds. The Shilluk were not entirely different—like Nuer and Dinka, they tended to see their lives as revolving around cattle—but in practice they have, for the last several centuries at least, become far more sedentary, as they were fortunate enough to find themselves along a particularly fertile stretch of the White Nile that allowed for intensive cultivation of durra, a local grain. The result was a very dense population—by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century estimated at around two hundred thousand—living in some hundred settlements arranged so densely along the Nile that foreigners often described the 200 miles of the heart of Shilluk territory as if it consisted of one continuous village. Many remarked it appeared to be the most densely settled part of Africa outside of Egypt itself (Mercer 1971, Wall 1976).

“Fortunate” though might seem an ill-chosen word here, since owing to the density of population, a bad harvest could lead to devastating famine. Lacking significant trade-goods, the Shilluk soon became notorious raiders, attacking camps and villages for hundreds of miles in all directions and hauling off cattle and grain and other spoils. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the 300 mile stretch of the Nile north of the Shilluk country, unsuitable for agriculture, was already known as Shilluk

“raiding country,” with small fleets of Shilluk canoes preying on caravans and cattle camps. Raids were normally organized by settlement chiefs.

The Shilluk *reth* appears to have been just one player in this predatory economy, effectively one bandit chief among many, and not even necessarily the most important, since while he received the largest share of booty, his base was in the south, closer to the pastoral Dinka rather than the richer prey to the north (Mercer 1971:416). Nonetheless, the *reth* acquired a great deal of cattle and used it to maintain a personal entourage of Bath Reth or “king’s men” who were his principle retainers, warriors, and henchmen.

It is unclear if there even was a single figure called the “*reth*” in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, or whether the royal genealogies that have come down to us really justpatched together a series of particularly prominent warriors.<sup>1</sup> The institutions of “divine kingship” that have made the Shilluk famous appear to have been created by the *reths* listed as number nine and ten on most royal genealogies: Tokot (c1670-1690), famous for his conquests among the Nuba and Dinka, but most of all, by his son Tugo (c1690-1710), who lived at a time when Shilluk successes had been reversed and the heartland itself was under attack by the Dinka. Tugo is said to have been the first to create a permanent royal capital, at Fashoda,<sup>2</sup> and to create its shrines and famous rituals of installation (ogot 1964, Mercer 1971, Wall 1976, Schnepel 1990: 114; Frost 1974). Ogot was the first to suggest that Tugo effectively invented the sacred kingship, fastening

---

<sup>1</sup> Frost (1974: 187–188) suggests the institution might ultimately derive from military leaders referred to as *bany*, who at least among the neighboring Dinka, also have rain-making responsibilities.

<sup>2</sup> The name is an Arabization of its real name, Pachod. It is, incidentally, not the same as the “Fashoda” of the famous “Fashoda crisis” that almost brought war between Britain and France in 1898, since “Fashoda” in this case is—however confusingly—an Arabization of the name of a rather desultory mercantile town called Kodok outside Shilluk territory to the north.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



David Graeber

The divine kingship of the Shilluk  
On violence, utopia, and the human condition, or, elements  
for an archaeology of sovereignty  
2011

Retrieved on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2020 from [https://  
www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.14318/hau1.1.002](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.14318/hau1.1.002)

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**

he used to pass them in constant watchfulness, prowling round his huts fully armed, peeping into the blackest shadows, or himself standing silent and alert, like a sentinel on duty, in some dark corner. When at last his rival appeared, the fight would take place in grim silence, broken only by the clash of spears and shields, for it was a point of honour with the king not to call the herdsmen to his assistance (Frazer 1913: 22, Fraser 1990: 200–201).

This was to become one of Frazer’s more famous romantic images, but in the first edition in which the Shilluk material appear, in 1913, the passage was accompanied by a footnote explaining that “in the present day and perhaps for the whole of the historical period” succession by ritual combat “has been superseded by the ceremonial killing of the king” (Frazer 1913: 22n1). This would suggest we are not dealing with a Victorian fantasy here—or not only—but with a Shilluk one, a legend about the ancient past.<sup>2</sup> But even here things are confusing: Frazer is simply citing Seligman, but Seligman also contradicts himself by simultaneously insisting (i.e., 1911: 222; also Hofmayr 1925: 175) that even in his own day, *reths* did tend to sleep during the day and keep armed vigil at night, and that the drowsy behavior of the *reth*, the one time he did meet one,

---

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, Evans-Pritchard (1948) ended up arguing exactly the opposite: that stories of ritual king-killing were the myth, and that in most cases one was really dealing with assassinations or rebellions. Mohammed Riad (1956: 171–177) however went through all existing historical information and could only find two examples of important rebellions in all Shilluk history, only one of which could really be called successful. Of twenty six historical kings, he noted, fifteen “surely met their death in the ceremonial way” (ibid.: 176). Of the others, two were killed in war, three executed by the government in Khartoum, and six died of unknown causes. On the other hand he includes the four known cases of murder by rival princes as ceremonial deaths, which does rather muddy the picture. At least it makes clear this did happen, but only rarely.

would appear to confirm this. In fact, such stories seem to be typical of the mysteries surrounding royalty. very few people knew what really went on at Fashoda, and everything concerning kings was tinged with confusion, fascination, and danger.<sup>3</sup>

All evidence suggests that, except perhaps during periods of civil unrest or when the *reth* had concrete evidence of some particular conspiracy, life in Fashoda was distinctly more relaxed. True, many observers do remark on the eerie quiet of the place, much in contrast with other Shilluk settlements. But this is for an entirely different reason. Fashoda was entirely lacking in children (e.g., Riad 1959: 197). As the reader will recall, not only was the settlement occupied almost entirely by women, the king's wives were sent back to their natal villages in order to give birth, and the children were not raised in Fashoda. It is a place where there is sex, but no biological reproduction, no nursing, no child-rearing—but also, no old age, grave illness or natural death, since the king is not allowed to grow frail and pass away in the normal fashion, and his wives normally return to their parents' settlements before they grow very old.

All of this very much recalls the villages described by Simonse further to the south, where birth and killing—or anything involving the spilling of blood—were considered “hot,” violent, dangerous activities which should be kept entirely outside the confines of inhabited space. Even animal sacrifices had to be, like the Shilluk *reth*, smothered so that no blood was spilled. These restrictions were especially severe during the agricultural season, since they were the key to ensuring rain. Rain, in turn, was the temporary restoration of that happy conjunction of heaven and earth was severed in the beginning of time. It seems hardly coincidental, then, that almost all of the *reths* ritual responsibilities involved either presiding over cere-

---

<sup>3</sup> On both sides: Hofmayr writes “at night he [the Reth] is awake and walks heavily armed around the village. His hand is full of spears and rifles. Whoever comes close to him is doomed” (1925: 175, in Schnepel 1991: 50).



monies appealing to Nyikang to send the rains, or harvest rituals (Oyler 1918a: 285–286, Seligman and Seligman 1932: 80–82)—or even, that it was considered a matter of principle that the king and his wives did work at least a few symbolic fields, and followed the same agricultural processes as everybody else (Riad 1959: 196).

I might add here that many of the more exotic-seeming practices of the capital seem to be adopted from ordinary Shilluk practice. As the reader will recall, all women, for example, were expected to leave their husbands and return to their natal villages in the sixth month of pregnancy (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 69)—though in the case of non-royals, they returned with their baby shortly after giving birth—old people deemed to be suffering unduly from incurable conditions were often “helped to die” (Hofmayr 1925: 299). According to Howell, even the effigies had a kind of demotic precedent, since if someone dies far from home her kin can hold a ceremony to pass her soul to a stick of ambatch, which is also the wood used to make effigies, so that it can be buried in her stead (1953: 159; see also Oyler 1918: 291).

What I have described above, at any rate, were the things that an ordinary Shilluk was likely to actually know about Fashoda. The overall picture seems clear. Fashoda was a little image of heaven. However imperfect, it was the closest one could come, in these latter days, to a restoration of the primal unity that preceded the separation of the earth and heaven. It was a place whose inhabitants experience neither birth nor death, although they do enjoy the pleasures of the flesh, ease, treasure and abundance (there was rumored to be a storehouse of plundered wealth and certain clans were charged with periodically bringing the *reth* tasty morsels), and also engaged in agricultural production—if, like the original couple, Garang and Abuk, only just a little bit.

It is, then, an undoing of the dilemma of the human condition. Obvious it was a partial, provisional one. The Shilluk

*reth* was, as Bernhardt Schnepel aptly put it (1995), “temporarily immortal.” He was Nyikang, but he was also not Nyikang; Nyikang was God, but he was also not God. And even this limited degree of perfection could only be brought about by a complex play of balanced antagonism that would inevitably engulf him in the end.

## The intallation ritual: description

All of this, I think, gives us the tools with which to interpret the famous Shilluk installation ceremonies.

One must bear in mind here that this ritual is one of the few occasions in which an ordinary Shilluk was likely to actually see a *reth*: the others being while he is administering justice, and possibly, during raids or war. Almost every clan played some role in the proceedings, whether in the preparation or rebuilding of royal dwellings beforehand to bringing sacrificial animals, regalia, or presiding over certain stages of the rituals themselves. It was in this sense the only real “national” ritual. The sense of popular participation was made all the more lively since, the rituals being so endlessly complicated and there usually having been such a long a time since they had last been performed, each step would tend to be accompanied by lively debate by all concerned as to what the correct procedure was.

When a king dies, he is not said to have died but to have “vanished,” or to have “gone across the river”—much as was said of Nyikang. Normally, Nyikang is both immanent in the person of the king, and also, in an effigy kept in a temple in the settlement of Akurwa, north of Fashoda. This effigy too is destroyed after a king’s death. The *reth*’s body is conveyed to a sealed hut and left there for about a year, or at least until it is certain that nothing remains but bones; at that point, the Ororo will convey the skeleton to its permanent tomb in the *reth*’s natal village, and conduct a public a funeral dance. It is only afterwards that a new *reth* can be installed.

This interim period, while the king's body lies decomposing and Nyikang's effigy is gone, is considered a period of interregnum. It is always represented as a time of chaos and disorder, a "year of fear." According to Howell and Thompson, who wrote the most detailed account of the rituals, messengers send out word that "There is no land—the Shilluk country has ceased to be" (1946: 18). Others speak of the land as "spoiled" or "ruined," the same language used in Dinka and Nuer songs to describe the state of the world since the separation of heaven and earth (Howell 1952: 159–160). At any rate it is clear that with the rupture in the center, the image of perfection on earth and thus guarantor of the kingdom, everything is thrown into disarray. During this time, all important matters are put on hold, other than, presumably, the frantic politicking surrounding the election of the new *reth*. There were usually at least a dozen potential candidates. Settlement chiefs lobbied for their favorites, princesses offered bribes, royals conspired and plotted and there was a real fear that everything would descend into civil war. As the chief of Deballo explained in 1975:

It is the period when we fear each other. I fear you and you fear me. If we meet away from the village, we can kill each other and no-one will prevent us. So the meaning of *wang yomo* [year of fear] is that we are all afraid and keep to our own homes, because there is no king (Singer 1975, in Schnepel 1988: 443).

This sounds very much like a Hobbesian war of all against all. Still, when the chief suggests that the chaos is the result of the mere absence of the king's power to impose justice, one must bear in mind that this is a local official who grew up in a time of strong state authority, during which the *reth* was subordinated to, but also supported by, Sudanese police. In earlier centuries, as we've seen, the *reth* did not play this role. Rather, it would

Young, M. 1964. "The divine kingship of the Jukun: a re-evaluation of some theories." *Africa* 36: 135–52.

- Tropical Research Laboratories*, Volume B, General Science: 216–38.
- . 1931. “The religion of the Pagan Tribes of the White Nile.” *Africa* 4 (1): 1–21.
- . 1934. *Egypt and negro Africa: a study in divine kingship*. The 1933 Frazer Lecture. London: Routledge.
- Seligman, Charles Gabriel and Brenda Z. Seligman. 1932. “The Shilluk.” In *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*. London: Routledge, pp. 37–105.
- Simonse, Simon. 1992. *Kings of disaster: dualism, centralism and the scapegoat king in the Southeastern Sudan*. Leiden: Brill.
- . 2005. “Tragedy, ritual and power in Nilotic regicide: the regicidal dramas of the Eastern Nilotes of Sudan in contemporary perspective.” In *The Character of Kingship*, edited by Declan, Quigley, 67–100. Oxford: Berg.
- Singer, André. 1975. *The Shilluk of Southern Sudan*. BBC, Disappearing World Series. Directed by Chris Curling. Anthropological consultants Paul Howell, Walter Kuniy Wok, and André Singer. 52 minutes
- Spaulding, Jay. 2007. *The heroic age in Sinnar*. Asmara: Red Sea Press.
- Thomson, W. P. G. 1948. “Further notes on the death of a reth of the Shilluk (1945).” *Sudan Notes and Records* 29: 151–60.
- Udal, John O. 1998. *The Nile in darkness: conquest and exploration, 1504–1862*. Norwich: Michael Russell.
- Wall, L. Lewis 1975. “Anuak politics, ecology, and the origins of Shilluk kingship.” *Ethnology* 15: 151–162.
- Westermann, Dietrich. 1911. *Shilluk people: their language and folklore*. Philadelphia: Board of Foreign Missions of the United Presbyterian Church of North America.
- Wilson, Monica. 1959. *Divine kings and “the breath of men.”* The 1959 Frazer Lecture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wrigley, Christopher. 1996. *Kingship and state: the Buganda dynasty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

seem that the interregnum was the time when royal politics—ordinarily kept at a safe distance from ordinary people’s lives—really did spill over into society as a whole, and that, as a result, anyone became a potential enemy.

Traditionally, the interregnum lasted roughly a year, and ended during the “cool months” after the harvest in January and February, when the new election would be held so that the *reth* could be installed. It was considered important the installation be completed in time to allow the new *reth* to preside over rainmaking ceremonies in April.

Neither was the election itself, conducted by twenty major chiefs or *Jago*, presided over by the Chief of Deballo, definitive. As Schnepel (1988: 444) notes, the college of electors did not so much select a king as identify the candidate the chiefs feel most likely to be able to successfully endure the series of tests and crises that make up the ritual. Every step, in fact, was a kind of an ordeal and, thus, another judgment. Candidates often feared assassination at critical points of the ceremony; it was said if they were so much as injured in the course of them, they would be declared unfit and disqualified. (For commoner participants, the rituals were also tinged with fear, but at the same time, enormously entertaining. The effigies of Nyikang and Dak, according to most sources, were seen as particularly amusing.)

Let me lay out the events, in abbreviated form, in roughly their order of occurrence.<sup>1</sup>

Once the electoral college, presided over by chiefs of the Northern and Southern halves of the country, had reached a

---

<sup>1</sup> Schnepel (1988) provides the best published blow-by-blow summary. What follows is drawn from my own reading of the standard primary sources: Munro 1918; Oylar 1918a; Hofmayr 1925; Howell and Thomson 1946, 1952; Thomson 1948; Howell 1952a, 1953a; Anonymous 1956; but also Riad 1959, who adds some telling details. All these seem to be derived from three ceremonies: the installations of Fafiti (1917), Anei (1944) and Dak (1946).

decision, word was sent to the prince, who could be expected to be lingering nearby:

The method of summoning the *reth* was interesting... The chief of Gol Nyikang<sup>2</sup> sent his son by night to get him. Whether or not there was a mock fight between the selected candidate and the messengers I do not know, but the traditional form of the words announcing the choice was told to me. It is an interesting example of Shilluk “understatement” when talking of the reth—“you are our Dinka slave, we want to kill you” which means “You are our chosen *reth*, we want to install you in Fashoda” (Thomson 1945: 154).

(At this point it is possible to finally proceed with the final burial of the old king and the initiation of his shrine—this, unlike the election, which is primarily an affair of commoners, is presided over strictly by royals.)<sup>3</sup>

The candidate-elect is now summoned, shaved and washed by Ororo women, and placed in seclusion. Immediately thereafter, select detachments of men from the Northern and Southern halves of the country begin, set out on expeditions to acquire materials needed in the ritual, and particularly, with which to remake the effigy of Nyikang.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The name given the northern half of the country during the ritual, the south being Ghol Dhiang. It is interesting of course that the northern half should be named after Nyikang since this is the portion of the country Nyikang is said *not* to have conquered, but it is also where his effigy normally resides.

<sup>3</sup> There is some confusion over when this ceremony takes place. Schnepel (1988) follows Howell and Thomson (1946) in placing it immediately after the election, but Riad (1959: 182) suggests the latter were describing an exceptional circumstance and that the funeral normally occurred well after the new *reth*'s installation.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy James, one of the peer reviewers notes, not without justice, that this essay rather downplays the larger significance of the division of

- Riad, Mohamed. 1953. “Some observations of a fieldtrip among the Shilluk.” *Wiener Volkerkundliche Mitteilungen*, 3: 70–78.
- . 1959. “The divine kingship of the Shilluk and its origin.” *Archiv für Völkerkunde* 14: 141–284.
- Richards, Audrey. 1968. “Keeping the king divine.” *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 23–35.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1981. “The stranger-king or Dumézil among the Fijians.” *Journal of Pacific History* 16: 107–132.
- . 1983. “Raw women, cooked men, and other “great things” of the Fijian Islands.” In *The Ethnography of Cannibalism*, edited by Paul, Brown and Donald, Tuzin, 72–93. Washington D.C.: Society for Psychological Anthropology.
- . 2008. “The stranger-king: or, elementary forms of the politics of life.” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 36 (105): 177–99.
- Schnepel, Burkhard. 1986. *Five approaches to the theory of divine kingship and the kingship of the Shilluk of the Southern Sudan*. Ph.D. thesis, Oxford: Bodleian Library.
- . 1988. “Shilluk royal ceremonies of death and installation,” *Anthropos* 83: 433–52.
- . 1990. “Shilluk kingship: power struggles and the question of succession,” *Anthropos* 85: 105–24.
- . 1991. “Continuity despite and through death: regicide and royal shrines among the Shilluk of Southern Sudan.” *Africa* 61 (1): 40–70.
- . 1995. *Twinned beings: kings and effigies in Southern Sudan, East India and renaissance France*. Göteborg: Institute for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology.
- Scubla, Lucien. 2002. “Hocart and the royal road to anthropological understanding.” *Social Anthropology* 10 (3): 359–76.
- . 2003. “Roi sacré, victime sacrificielle et victime émissaire.” *Revue du MAUSS* 22: 197–221.
- Seligman, Charles Gabriel. 1911. “The cult of Nyakang and the divine kings of the Shilluk,” *Fourth Report of the Welcome*

- of a People.” <http://www.dur.ac.uk/justin.willis/nyaba.htm>, accessed 4/8/2007.
- Ogot, B. A. 1961. “The concept of Juok.” *African Studies* 20: 134–140.
- . 1964. “Kingship and statelessness among the Nilotes.” In *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, edited by Jan, Vansina, R., Mauny, L.-V., Thomas, 294–299. London: Oxford University Press.
- Oyler, D. S. 1918a. “Nikawng’s place in the Shilluk religion.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 1: 283–301.
- . 1918b. “Nikawng and the Shilluk migration.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 1: 107–15.
- . 1919. “The Shilluk’s belief in the Evil Eye.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 2: 122–137.
- . 1920a. “The Shilluk’s belief in the Good Medicine Man.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 3: 110–116.
- . 1920b. “The Shilluk peace ceremony.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 3: 296–299.
- . 1926. “Shilluk notes.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 9: 57–68.
- Paul, A. 1952. “The mar of the Shilluk.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 33: 165–166.
- Pumphreys, M. E. C. 1936. “Shilluk ‘royal’ language conventions.” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 20: 319–321.
- . 1941. “The Shilluk tribe.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 24: 1–46.
- Quigley, Declan. 1993. *The interpretation of caste*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.
- . 2000. “Scapegoats: the killing of kings and ordinary people.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6 (2): 237–54.
- . 2005. “Introduction: the character of kingship.” In *The Character of Kingship*, edited by Declan, Quigley, 1–23. Oxford: Berg.
- Ray, Benjamin C. 1991. *Myth, ritual, and kingship in Buganda*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This effigy is so important, and so famous, that it is fitting to offer a full description. Actually Nyikang’s effigy is one of three such: in addition to his, there is also an effigy of his rambunctious son Dak, and finally, one of his older, but timid, son Cal. Nyikang and Dak’s effigies almost always appear together; the effigy of Cal is far less important, only appearing at the very last day of the ceremony. The body of Nyikang’s effigy consisted of a five and half-foot trunk of *ambatch* wood, adorned with cloth and bamboo, and topped with a crown of ostrich feathers. Dak is similar in composition but his body is much smaller; however, unlike Nyikang, his effigy is normally carried atop an eight-foot-tall bamboo pole. (The effigy of Cal consists primarily of rope.) ordinarily, all three are kept in Nyikang’s most famous shrine, in the village of Akurwa—said to be the very place where Nyikang vanished into the whirlwind. Their traditional keepers are a clan called Kwa Nyikwom (“Children of the Stool”), the inhabitants of the place:

These effigies are not merely symbols. They may “become active” at any time, and when active they are Nyikang and Dak. The effigy of Nyikang is rarely taken on a journey in normal times, though it is often brought out to dance during religious festivals at Akurwa itself. The effigy of Dak makes periodical excursions through the country. Both effigies have an important part to play in the ceremonies of installation. The soul of Nyikang is manifest in the effigy for the occasion, and he must march from Akurwa to Fashoda to test the

---

Shillukland into a Northern and Southern half, which has political as well as ritual implications. Invaders and powerful foreign influences (the Turks, the Mahdi, Arab traders, the Funj) invariably enter from the north, and this historical pattern is endlessly reproduced in the ritual. Fashoda of course stands precisely at the border between the two halves.

qualities of the new successor and to install him in the capital (Howell and Thomson 1946: 40).

Before this can be done, however, the effigy of Nyikang—destroyed after the death of the former *reth*—has to be entirely recreated, and that of Dak, refurbished.

All the expeditions that set out of the country to gather materials are organized like war parties, and some of them—such as those sent into the “raiding country” to acquire ivory, silver and cloth, originally were expected to acquire them by ambushing villages or caravans. In more recent times they have been obliged instead to buy them in markets to the north of Shillukland. However, whether they were sent outside the country to hunt ostriches or antelopes, or to gather rope or bamboo, all these parties are clearly seen as seizing goods by force, and they made little distinction between Shilluk and foreigners, since along the way “they are given, or take, what they want from Shilluk as they pass” (*ibid.*: 38).<sup>5</sup>

All of these expeditions also seem to be under the broad aegis of Dak, whose effigy remains in the temple during the whole of the interregnum, except when leading occasional expeditions outside.<sup>6</sup> The “raiding country” to the north of Shillukland is seen as his particular domain.

The most important of these expeditions by far is the one dispatched to find the new body of Nyikang. It is led by the effigy of Dak, accompanied by his keepers from among the Children of the Stool, along with some men from the settle-

---

<sup>5</sup> The Ororo who carry the king’s skeleton to its final resting place have a similar right to “seize small gifts and ransom from those unfortunate enough to cross their path” (Howell 1952: 160) and even those villages preparing gear for the ritual can do the same from anyone passing by at the time (Anonymous 1956: 99). But as we’ll see it is the effigies of Nyikang and Dak especially who are famous for this sort of thing.

<sup>6</sup> For example, two months before the ceremonies begin, the effigy of Dak presides over an expedition to Fanyikang to obtain certain sacred ropes (Howell and Thomson 1946: 38).

- Kapteijns, Lidwien, and Jay, Spaulding. 1982. “Precolonial trade between states in the Eastern Sudan, ca 1700 — ca 1900.” *African Economic History* 11: 29–62.
- Kantorowicz, E. H. 1957. *The king’s two bodies: a study in medieval political theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kunijwok, G. A. W. 1982. *Government and community in a modern state: a case study of the Shilluk and their neighbors*. Ph.D. thesis, Oxford: Bodleian library.
- Kurimoto, Eisei. 1992. “An ethnography of ‘bitterness’: cucumber and sacrifice reconsidered.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22 (1): 47–65.
- Lienhardt, R. Godfrey. 1952. “The Shilluk of the Upper Nile.” In *African Worlds*, edited by Daryl, Forde, 138–63. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1953. “Nilotic kings and their mothers’ kin.” *Africa* 25 (1): 29–42.
- . 1961. *Divinity and experience: the religion of the Dinka*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1979. “Getting your own back: themes in Nilotic myth,” in *Studies in Social Anthropology*, edited by J. H. M., Beattie and R. G., Lienhardt, 213–37. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mercer, Patricia. 1971. “Shilluk trade and politics from the mid-seventeenth century to 1861.” *Journal of African History* 12 (3): 407–426.
- Mogenson, Hanne. 2002. “The resilience of *juok*: confronting suffering in Eastern Uganda.” *Africa* 72 (2): 420–436
- Muller, Jean-Claude. 1980. *Le Roi bouc émissaire: pouvoir et rituel chez les Rukuba du Nigeria Central*. Montreal: Serge Fleury.
- Munro, P. 1918. “Installation of the Ret of the Chol (King of the Shilluks).” In *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*, edited by C. G., and B. Z., Seligman, 541–547. London: Routledge.
- Nyaba, Peter Adwok. 2006. “The Chollo Predicament: the Threat of Physical Extermination and Cultural Extinction



- Hocart, A. M. 1927. *Kingship*. London: Oxford University Press.
- . 1933. *Progress of Man; a short survey of his evolution, his customs and his works*. London: Methuen.
- . 1936. *Kings and councilors: an essay in the comparative anatomy of human society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1952. *The life-giving myth, and other essays*. London: Methuen.
- . 1954. *Social origins*. London: Watts.
- Hofmayr, Wilhelm. 1911. "Religion der Shilluk." *Anthropos* 6: 120–131.
- . 1925. *Die Shiiluk. Geschichte, religion, und leben einze Niloten-Stammes*. Mölding: Verlag der Administration des Anthropos.
- Howell, P. P. 1941. "The Shilluk settlement." *Sudan Notes and Records* 24: 47–67.
- . 1952a. "The death and burial of Reth Dak wad Fadiet of the Shilluk," *Sudan Notes and Records* 33: 156–65.
- . 1952b. "Observations on the Shilluk of the Upper Nile. The laws of homicide and the legal functions of the Reth." *Africa*, 22: 97–119.
- . 1953a. "The election and installation of Reth Kur wad Fafiti of the Shilluk," *Sudan Notes and Records* 34: 189–203.
- . 1953b. "Observations on the Shilluk of the Upper Nile. Customary law: marriage and the violation of rights in women." *Africa* 23: 94–109.
- Howell, P. P. and W. P. G., Thomson 1946. "The death of a Reth of the Shilluk and the installation of his successor." *Sudan Notes and Records* 27: 5–85.
- . 1952. "The death of Reth Dak wad Fadiet and the installation of his successor: a preliminary note." *Man* 52: 102–4.
- Johnson, Douglas H. 2011. *The root causes of Sudan's civil wars*. James Currey: Woodbridge and Rochester NY.

ment of Mwuomo in the far north of the Shilluk country, who act as divers. After sacrificing a cow so that its blood runs into the river, they set out from Akurwa in canoes to an island in the midst of the "raiding country" called "the island of Nyikang." A drum is beaten; Dak scours the waters of the Nile; when a white bird appears to indicate the right spot, ornaments are cast into the water as an offering, along with a sacrificial ram, and a diver descends to search for an *ambatch* trunk of roughly the right size to make the new body of Nyikang (Howell 1953: 194). If he finds one, the body is wrapped in a white cloth and carried back to Akurwa, where both Nyikang and Dak are outfitted with their newly acquired cloth, feathers, and bamboo. But luck was not guaranteed. Riad's informants emphasized that Nyikang himself has specifically instructed his descendants to observe this custom as an "ordeal," to test the *reth*-elect, since, although the latter does not participate in the ceremony, Nyikang will not appear if he disapproves of the electors' choice. In fact, they emphasized that if the trunk could not be found, the entire ceremony had to be conducted again, starting from Akurwa, and that after ten failures, the *reth*-elect would be killed and another candidate selected (1959: 189–190)—though, as with most dire warnings of the dangers of the ceremony, no one could remember a specific occasion when anything like this had actually occurred.

Once Nyikang has been brought to life again in the form of an effigy, he and Dak march to the northern border of the country and begin to assemble an army, drawn from the men of the Northern half. It is said that they retrace the steps of his original conquest of the country. The effigies are carried, and surrounded, by the Children of the Stool, many armed with whips to frighten away those who come too close, followed by a retinue carrying his drums, pots, shields, spears, and bed. No one is allowed to carry weapons in the effigies' presence, so when they stay overnight at village shrines, their hosts, who would ordinarily be carrying spears, carry millet stalks instead.

During this time Nyikang would usually retire, and Dak come out to dance with, and bless, the assembled crowds. Everyone comes out to see the show, and to ask for cattle, sheep, spears, etc. But they also hide their chickens:

It is usual for gifts of a sheep or a goat to be presented or exacted by Nyikang, and it was noticeable how all small stock or fowl were either shut up or driven away from the vicinity of Nyikang, for Nyikang has the right to anything he fancies. As Nyikang proceeds with Dak his son beside him, the escort chants the songs of Nyikang and Dak recounting their exploits of conquest. From time to time Nyikang turns round and dances back as if to threaten those following. When he does this, Dak rushes ahead, carried in a charging position, his body held horizontally pointed like a spear... (Howell and Thomson 1946: 41–42).

Occasionally, though things could also get out of hand:

It is accepted custom among the Shilluk that Nyikang and his followers may seize cattle, sheep or goats which cross their path (most Shilluk are wise enough to keep them out of the way) or to demand them as offerings together with other smaller gifts from the occupants of the villages through which they pass. This licensed plundering, which is often abused beyond the bounds of piety by Nyikang's retinue, is treated by the Shilluk with admirable tolerance... At one point on the march at Moro, however, their demands were thought to be excessive and were resisted, a demonstration which nearly ended in armed conflict and which delayed the party for a while (Howell 1953: 195).

- Giesey, R. E. 1967. *The royal funerary ceremony in renaissance France*. Geneva: Librairie E. Droz.
- Girard, René. 1977. *Violence and the sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Graeber, David. 1996. "Beads and money; notes toward a theory of wealth and power." *American Ethnologist* 23 (1): 4–24.
- . 1997. "Manners, deference and private property." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39 (4): 694–728.
- . 2004. *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2005. "Fetishism and social creativity, or fetishes are gods in process of construction." *Anthropological Theory* 5 (4): 407–438.
- Gray, Robert. 1961. *A history of the southern Sudan 1839–1889*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom and Finn Stepputat. 2005. *Sovereign bodies; citizens, migrants, and states in the postcolonial world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2006. "Sovereignty revisited." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 295–315.
- Heusch, Luc de. 1962. "Aspects de la sacralité du pouvoir en Afrique." In *Le Pouvoir et le sacré*, edited by L., de Heusch, P., Derchain, A., Finet, 139–158. Bruxelles: Université Libre, Institut de sociologie (Annales du Centre d'études des religions, 1).
- . 1972. *Le Roi ivre ou l'origine de l'état*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1982. *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1997. "The symbolic mechanisms of kingship; rediscovering Frazer." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3 (2): 313–332.
- . 2000. *Le roi de Kongo et les monstres sacrés*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 2005. "Forms of sacralized power in Africa." In *The Character of Kingship*, edited by Declan, Quigley, 25–37. Oxford: Berg

- Americas*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Urizen Books.
- Crazzolaro, J. P. 1950. *The Lwoo*. Part I: *Lwoo migrations*. Verona: Missioni Africane.
- . 1951. *The Lwoo*. Part II: *Lwoo traditions*. Verona: Missioni Africane.
- Driberg, J. H. 1932. “The status of women among the Nilotics and Nilo-Hamites.” *Africa* 5 (4): 404–421.
- Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1940. *The Nuer: a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. Oxford: Clarendon press.
- . 1948. *The divine kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan*. The 1948 Frazer Lecture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1951. “Shilluk king-killing.” *Man* 51: 116.
- . 1954. “The Meaning of Sacrifice Among the Nuer.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 84: 21–33.
- . 1956. *Nuer Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Evens, T. M. S. 1989. “The Nuer incest prohibition and the nature of kinship: alterological reckoning.” *Cultural Anthropology* 4 (4): 323–346.
- Feeley-Harnik, Gillian. 1984. “Issues in divine kingship.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 14: 273–313.
- Frankfort, Henri. 1978. *Kingship and the gods: a study of ancient near eastern religion as the integration of society and nature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fraser, Robert. 1990. *The making of The golden bough: the origins and growth of an argument*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Frazer, James. 1913a. *The dying god*. Part III of *The golden bough*. London: Macmillan.
- . 1913b. *The scapegoat*. Part VI of *The golden bough*. London: Macmillan.
- Frost, John. 1974. *A history of the Shilluk of the southern Sudan*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara.

At the same time, the whole procedure is considered something of a farce. Howell remarks that “the effigies are treated by the Shilluk with a mixture of hilarity and dread: mixed emotions that are always apparent” (ibid.: 192). At any rate, it is clear enough what’s happening. The effigies, assembled from pieces drawn from outside the country, descend on Shillukland like an alien, predatory force. On one level what they are doing is all in good fun; on another, they represent forces that are quite real, and the consequences are potentially serious.

Nyikang and Dak proceed from settlement to settlement, gathering their forces, retracing, as noted, their original path of conquest. Often members of new communities will at first oppose them, then, energized, rally to their side. Finally, they approach Fashoda.

The king has all this time been in seclusion in the capital, but on hearing of Nyikang’s passage through Golbainy, the capital of the Northern Half of the country, he flees at night to take refuge in Deballo, the capital of the Southern Half. During that night all fires are put out in both villages. The chief of Deballo challenges the *reth*-elect, asking his business. He replies “I am the man sent by God to rule the land of the Shilluk” (Hofmayr 1925: 145). Unimpressed, the chief has his men try to block his party from entering, leading to mock battles where, after being repelled three times, the *reth*-elect finally enters. At this point the fires are relit, using fire-sticks. According to Riad, three are lit in front of the king’s hut, one from the royal family, one from the Ororo, and one from the people. “These fires, one of the symbols of royalty, are never put out as long as the king lives, and are transported to Fashoda when the king moves to the capital” (Riad 1959: 190).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Actually, Riad claims these fires are traditionally lit at the same time as the water ordeal—but in order to make the claim, he has to also argue that in former times, the king used to move back and forth between Fashoda and Deballo during his seclusion. Whether or not this is the case, the parallel he or more likely his informants are trying to draw here—between water in the

Once in Deballo, the *reth*-elect gathers his own followers. At some times he is surrounded by men seeking forgiveness for sexual misdemeanors: he grants this in exchange for gifts of sheep and goats. At others he is himself treated “like a small boy,” belittled and humiliated by the chief, made to sleep in a rude hut and to herd sheep or cattle. He is formally betrothed to an eight- to ten-year-old girl, called the *nyakwer* or “girl of the ceremonies,” who will be his almost constant companion from them on. Gradually, the southern chiefs all arrive with their warriors, to match Nyikang’s army of the north. Both sides prepare for a ritual battle which is always fought along the banks of a river that represents the official border between the two divisions of the country.

The candidate marches up surrounded by the Ororo, who are his bodyguards but at the same time, the symbols of his mortality. He proceeds north towards Fashoda sitting backwards on an ox, which is led by its tail, and alongside a heifer, also walking backwards. Nyikang dispatches messengers to mock him. Before crossing the river, he and the girl step over a sheep, then a black bull before crossing the river, thus consecrating them for sacrifice. It is said in earlier days he used to step over an old man who was then trampled by the people after him, usually, to death. The two forces proceed to do battle, each side unleashing a volley of millet stalks in lieu of spears. Nyikang’s followers, however, are also armed with whips, reputed to be so powerful that a direct blow could cause madness. As a result, the southern forces are put to rout, and at the height of the battle, the bearers of Nyikang and Dak sweep forward and surround the *reth*-elect, carrying him off as prisoner to Fashoda, together with the “girl of the ceremonies.”

On their arrival, the heifer is ritually sacrificed.

---

North, and fire in the south—seems significant. Seligman (1934: 9) adds one of the three fires is transported to Fashoda as the “life token” of the king.

## Bibliography

- Anonymous. 1956. “The installation of a new Shilluk king.” *Sudan Notes and Records* 37: 99–101.
- Arens, W. 1979. “The divine kingship of the Shilluk: a contemporary evaluation,” *Ethnos* 44: 167–181.
- . 1983. “A note on Evans-Pritchard and the prophets,” *Anthropos* 78: 1–16.
- . 1984. “The demise of kings and the meaning of kingship: royal funerary ceremony in the contemporary southern Sudan and Renaissance France.” *Anthropos* 79: 355–67.
- Beidelman, Thomas O. 1966a. “The ox and Nuer sacrifice: some Freudian hypotheses about Nuer symbolism.” *Man* (n.s.) 1: 453–467.
- . 1966b. “Swazi royal ritual.” *Africa* 36 (4): 373–405.
- . 1981. “The Nuer concept of *thek* and the meaning of sin: explanation, translation, and social structure.” *History of Religions* 21 (2): 126–155.
- Beltrame, Giovanni. 1881. *Il fume bianco e i Dénka*. Verona: Mazziana.
- Burton, John W. 1980. “Sacrifice: a polythetic class of Atuat religious thought.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11 (2): 93–105.
- . 1982. “Nilotic women: a diachronic perspective.” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 20 (3): 467–91.
- Clastres, Hélène. 1995. *The land-without-evil: Tupi-Guarani prophetism*, translated by Jacqueline Grenez Brovender. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Clastres, Pierre. 1977. *Society against the state: the leader as servant and the humane uses of power among the Indians of the*

Still, behind those rules of engagement always lies at least the threat—and usually, periodically, the practice—of random, arbitrary, indiscriminate destruction. It is only in this sense that the state is, as Thomas Hobbes so famously put it, a “mortal god.”

I don't think there is anything inevitable about all this. The will to sovereignty is not, as reactionaries always want us to believe, something inherent in the nature of human desire—as if the desire for autonomy was always also necessarily the desire to dominate and destroy. Neither however does the historical emergence of forms of sovereignty mark some kind of remarkable intellectual or organizational breakthrough. Actually, taken simply as an idea, sovereignty, like monotheism, is an extraordinarily simple concept that almost anyone could have thought of. The problem is it is not simply an idea: it is better seen, I think, as proclivity, a tendency of interpretation immanent in certain sorts of social and material circumstances, but one which nonetheless can be, and often is, resisted. As Luc de Heusch makes clear, it is not even essential to the nature of government. Only by putting sovereignty in its place, it seems to me, can we begin to look realistically at the full range of human possibilities.

Once in the capital, however, the two figures begin to fuse. Nyikang's sacred stool is taken from his shrine; a white canopy is arranged around it, and the effigies and their captives are brought inside. First Nyikang is first placed on the throne, then removed and replaced with the *reth*-elect. He begins to tremble, and exhibit signs of possession—the soul of Nyikang, it is said, has left the effigy and entered the king. He's doused with cold water. At this point the effigies retreat to their shrine, and the *reth* is revealed to the assembled people, as his wives (newly transferred from the harem of the previous king) warm water for a ritual bath “while the Ret sat like a graven image on the chair” (Munro 1918: 151), himself now an effigy, and later was led out before the assembled people. In one case, at least, observers remarked he seemed visibly in trance. After the sacrifice of an ox, he was led to a temporary “camp” just opposite the shrine, where he was bathed in great secrecy, with water alternately warm and cool, to express the desire that he “rule with an even temper” (Howell and Thomson 1946: 64) and avoid extremes. This bath was part of a broader process of communion with the spirit of Nyikang of which was considered arcane knowledge about which outsiders should know little, but according to some, the *reth* spent many hours of contemplation as the soul passed fully into him.

The transfer of Nyikang's soul marked the new *reth*'s last public appearance for at least three days. Afterwards king remained in seclusion, guarded only by some Ororo and a few of his own retainers. Once again he is treated like a boy, expected to tend a small herd of cattle, and accompanied only by his betrothed child bride. At some point, though, adult sexuality intervenes. An Ororo woman (or in some versions, there are three of them) lures the king away to the shrines on the mound of Aturwic in Fashoda and seduces him;<sup>8</sup> while

---

<sup>8</sup> According to certain other versions he now commits incest with a half-sister, a very outrageous act. This is incidentally the closest the *reth*

he is thus distracted, Nyikang steals out from another of the shrines and kidnaps the “girl of the ceremonies.” On the king’s return, he discovers her gone and, pretending outrage, begins searching everywhere. On finally realizing what’s happened, he confronts the chief of Kwa Nyikwom (who is acting as Nyikang’s spokesman), explaining that the girl had been properly betrothed by a payment in cattle, and Nyikang had no right to her. The chief however insists that the herds used—which are, after all, the old *reth*’s herds—are really Nyikang’s.

Finally it comes down to another contest of arms. Both sides marshal their forces in Fashoda. This time, Nyikang is accompanied not only by the ferocious Dak but his hapless son Cal. A smaller mock battle follows, but this time, the Northerners’ whips prove ineffective. The *reth* sweeps in and recaptures the girl from Nyikang; finally, the effigies have to fight their way back into their own shrines, and negotiate their effective surrender. The girl remains with the king, who has, in his victory, demonstrated that he and not the effigy is the true embodiment of Nyikang. At this point the effigies disappear, and do not return for the remainder of the ceremonies.

At this point, too, the drama is also effectively over. The new *reth* spends the next day on his throne at Aturwic, holding court amidst an assembly of the nation’s chiefs. Each places his spear head down in the ground and delivers a speech urging the new ruler to respect elders and tradition, protect the weak, preserve the nation, and similar sage advice. Drums salute their words; the king is invested in two silver bracelets that serve as marks of office; an ox is speared. Finally the king is given a tour of the capital. Everything is back in place. The newly installed *reth* sends cattle for sacrifice to each of the shrines of Nyikang scattered throughout the country. Some weeks later he is ready

---

comes to committing one of de Heusch’s “exploits” and most sources do not even mention it.

has come to be included in the system of nation-states, but as a result, since that time, no wars have been formally declared, and despite hundreds of military conflicts, there have been only a handful that have involved the clash of regular armies between nation-states.

Obviously, the conceptual apparatus—the way we imagine war—is important. But it seems to me it is mainly important in occluding that more fundamental truth that the Nilotic material brings so clearly into focus. As those European travelers discovered, when asked by Nilotic kings to conduct raids or rain random gunfire on “enemy villages” that actually turned out to be inhabited by the king’s own subjects, there is no fundamental difference in the relation between a sovereign and his people, and a sovereign and his enemies. Inside and outside are both constituted through at least the possibility of indiscriminate violence. What differentiates the two—at least, when the differences are clear enough to bear noticing—is that the insiders share a commitment to a certain shared notion of utopia. Their war with the sovereign becomes the ground of their being, and thus, paradoxically, the ground of a certain notion of perfection—even peace.

Any more realistic exploration of the nature of sovereignty, I believe, should proceed from examination of the nature of this basic constitutive war. Unlike wars between states, the war between sovereign and people is a war that the sovereign can never, truly, win. Yet states seem to have an obsession with creating such permanent, unwinnable wars: as the United States has passed over the last half century from the War on Poverty to the War on Crime to the War on Drugs (the first to be internationalized) and now, to the War on Terror. The scale changes but the essential logic remains the same. This is the logic of the assertion of sovereignty. Of course, no war is (as Clausewitz falsely claimed) simply a contest of untrammelled force. Any sustained conflict, especially one between state and people, will have elaborately developed rules of engagement.

through war—assume there is a fundamental distinction between inside and outside, and particularly between violence inside and violence outside—that, in fact, this is constitutive of the very nature of politics. As a result, just about everyone (with the possible exception of anthropologists) who wishes to discuss the nature of “war” starts with examples of armed conflicts between two clearly defined political and territorial entities, usually assumed to be nation-states or something almost exactly like them, involving a clash of armies that ends either with conquest, or some sort of negotiated peace.<sup>6</sup> In fact, even the most cursory glance at history shows that only a tiny percentage of armed conflicts have taken such a form. In reality there is almost never a clear line between what we’d now call “war” and what we’d now call “banditry,” “terrorism,” “raids,” “massacres,” “duels,” “insurrections,” or “police actions.” Yet somehow in order to be able to talk about war in the abstract we have to imagine an idealized situation that only rarely actually occurs. True, during the heyday of European colonialism, from roughly 1648 to 1950, European states did attempt to set up a clear system of rules to order wars between nation-states, and in this period one finds a fair number of wars that do fit this abstract model, and in which all parties are playing by the rules; but these rules were only considered to apply within Europe, a tiny corner of the globe. Outside it, the same European powers became notorious for their willingness to toss aside the most apparently solemn agreements with native governments and their willingness to engage in every sort of indiscriminate violence. Even the signatories to the Geneva Conventions were careful to include a proviso that they did not apply to colonial wars. Most of the world was, effectively, a free-fire zone. Since 1950, the rest of the globe

---

<sup>6</sup> Or, sometimes they skip from description of monkeys, other sorts of animal behavior, or speculations about early hominids to wars between fully constituted nation-states. But generally there is nothing in between.

to preside over his first major ritual, a series of sacrifices calling on Nyikang to call on God to send the rain. Once the first rains fall, the effigies leave Fashoda and return to their shrine in Akurwa, and do not return until the new king dies.

Since the drama began with the people’s representatives announcing, “euphemistically,” that they wish to kill the candidate-elect, it might be best to end it by noting that even here, in the *reth*’s most benevolent function, there were similar, darker possibilities. While one would imagine a newly inaugurated *reth* would have nothing but enthusiasm for his role as rainmaker, this was not always assumed to be the case.

The king is the only authorized person to refuse or permit sacrifices at the important ritual ceremonies. The act of sacrificing animals to appease Juok, the highest spirit, and Nyikang, the demi-god, cannot be correctly undertaken without the king’s sanction. Without sacrifices the people’s wishes cannot be granted. It follows that the king is the real power in religious matters, and sometimes he withholds his beneficial powers if he feels the disloyalty of his subjects or their hatred towards him (Riad 1959: 205, citing Hofmayr 1925: 152n1).

In other words, while the *reth*, unlike Simonse’s rainmaking kings, was not personally responsible for bring down rain through magical means, his role was, at least potentially, not so different. A drought might well be blamed on royal spite—and presumably, begin to spur a political crisis, even if it was unlikely to end with an actual lynch mob.

## The installation ritual: analysis

To some degree, the symbolic structure of the ritual is quite transparent. There is a constant juxtaposition of North and South, the former the division of Nyikang, the latter, of the king. The North is identified with the eternal, universal “kingship”; the South, with the particular, mortal king. Hence as Evans-Pritchard put it, in the ritual, “the kingship captures the king” (1948: 27). Having been defeated as a human, the *reth*-elect becomes Nyikang, and is thus able to defeat the effigy and banish it back to its shrine.

Another obvious element is the opposition of fire and water. At the same time as the image of Nyikang emerges from the river far to the north, new fires are lit in Deballo, the capital of the South, that will burn for the rest of the king’s reign and be put out when he dies. Water here is eternity. It doesn’t even “represent” eternity, it *is* eternity; the Nile will always be there, and always the same. With the rains, it is the permanent source of fecundity and life. It is utterly appropriate therefore that Nyikang, whose mother was a crocodile and is called “child of the river,” should emerge from its waters.<sup>1</sup> Fire on the other hand is, like blood, the stuff of worldly transformation. In this case, the fires correspond to the mortal life of the individual king; they will exist exactly as long as he lives. It is thus equally

---

<sup>1</sup> All this is actually quite explicit: “as soon as the king dies, the spirit of Nyikang goes to his mother Nyikaya in the river, and the people will have to go to the river and bring him, and they will have to beg him to accept” (Singer in Schnepel 1988: 449).

definitively won. His ability to rain arbitrary destruction was unlimited not just in principle, but largely in practice, and the bodies of royal women were simply the most dramatic means of its display.

Granted, the situation was not ultimately viable. Such victories can never be sustained. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was assumed that every *kabaka*, driven mad by power, would eventually go too far, and be destroyed—if not by real flesh-and-blood rebels, then at least by the angry ghosts of his victims. By the end of the century the entire system was overthrown and mass executions abolished. What I really want to draw attention to here though is first of all, the intimate connection between the otherworldly perfection of royal courts and their violence—to the fact that such utopias do, always, rest on what we euphemistically call “force.” The second point is that the violence always cuts both ways. This is the truth that is being acknowledged in the Shilluk stories that show how Dak’s effigy—which represents what I have called the principle of divine kingship, the human capacity to become a god through violence—was created when the people as a whole set out to kill Dak, or how Nyikang vanished and became a god when everybody hated him.

What I would suggest is that this has remained the hidden logic of sovereignty. What we call “the social peace” is really just a truce in a constitutive war between sovereign power and “the people,” or “nation”—both of whom come into existence, as political entities, in their struggle against each other. Furthermore, this elemental war is prior to wars *between* nations.

To call this a “war” is to fly in the face of almost all existing political theory, which—whether it be a matter of Karl Schmidt’s argument that the first gesture of sovereignty is declaring the division of friend and foe, to Max Weber’s monopoly of legitimate use of force within a territory, to the assertion in *African Political Systems* that states are entities that resolve conflict internally through law, and outside,



and spoils, and hence, the ultimate arbiter of all forms of value. His was a secular court, with few of the formal trappings of sacral kingship. Still, the person of the king is always sacred, and the very fact that this was a regime based almost solely on force meant that the ritual surrounding the person of the king took on a unique ferocity. The *kabaka*, as he was called, did not leave the palace except carried by bearers and the punishment for gazing directly at him was death.

The rules of courtly etiquette, such as the prohibition against sneezing or coughing in the king's presence... were considered as important as the laws of the state, for behavior towards the king's person was regarded as an expression of one's allegiance to the throne he represented. Thus Mutesa sometimes condemned his wives to death because they coughed while he was eating (ibid.: 172).

Foreign observers like Speke and Livingstone wrote in horror of even wellborn princesses being dragged off to execution for the slightest physical infraction of courtly etiquette.<sup>5</sup> This might seem about as far as one can get from the Shilluk court, where women were sacrosanct and it was the king who was eventually executed. But in fact it was a precise inversion. The constant element is the illusion of physical perfection at the center, which brings with it the need to suppress whatever are taken to be the most significant signs of bodily weakness, illness, or lack of physical control—and above all, the fact that this illusion was ultimately enforced by threat of death. The difference is simply that the direction of the violence is here reversed. It is, perhaps, a simple result of a different balance of political forces. In the war between sovereign and people, the *reth* was at a constant disadvantage. The *kabaka* in contrast had

---

<sup>5</sup> No doubt some of this was simply to impress foreigners with the absoluteness of royal power; but such customs aren't improvised whole cloth.

appropriate that when the synthesis of Nyikang and *reth*, between the eternal principle and mortal office-holder, occurs, it should be accompanied by putting a fire to water. The “bath” during which the king becomes fully one with the demigod also unites the two elemental principles. Fire meets water as mortal man meets god.

All these elements are, as I say, relatively straightforward. Other elements are less so. The most puzzling is in the role of Nyikang's son Dak. Existing analyses—even those that have a great deal to say about the effigies (Evans-Pritchard 1946, Arens 1984, Schnepel 1988)—focus almost exclusively on Nyikang, who is always assumed to represent the timeless nature of the royal office. They rarely have anything to say about Dak. But in many ways Dak seems even more important than Nyikang: if nothing else, because (just as in the legends he is the first to transcend death through the means of an effigy) his is the only effigy that was genuinely eternal. When the king dies, Nyikang returns to his mother in the river. Dak remains. Dak's effigy then presides over the re-creation of Nyikang's. What is one to make of this?

It might help here to return to the overall cosmological framework. The reader will recall that the Shilluk Creator is rarely invoked directly, but largely approached through Nyikang.

The all-powerful being who exists in the minds of the Shilluk as a remote and amoral deity is called Juok. Juok is the Shilluk conception of God and is present to a greater and lesser degree in all things. Juok is the explanation of the unknown, the reassuring justification of all the supernatural phenomena, good and bad, of which life is made up. The principal medium through whom Juok is approached is Nyikang. The distinction between them is not clear. Nyikang is Juok, but Juok is

not Nyikang... Further the soul of Nyikang is reincarnate in every Shilluk *reth*, and thus exists both in the past and the present. Nyikang is the *reth*, but the *reth* is not Nyikang. The paradox of the unity yet separation is not easy to define. The Shilluk themselves would find it difficult to explain. Juok, Nyikang, and the *reth* represent the line through whom divinity runs... The *reth* is clearly himself the medium through which both Nyikang and, more vaguely, Juok are approached, and is the human intercessor with God (Howell and Thomson 1956: 8).

After many years of contemplation and debate scholars of Nilotic religions have learned to read such paradoxical phrases (“God is the sky, but the sky is not God”) as statements about refraction and encompassment. Nyikang is an aspect of God, but God is in no way limited to that aspect.<sup>2</sup>

We are presented, as in a rain-making ceremony, with a very straightforward model of a linear hierarchy:

The *reth* intercedes for the people and asks Nyikang to intercede with God to bring the rains. If the rain comes, it temporarily joins everything together. However, as we’ve seen, at every point there is potential antagonism. The people may hate the *reth* or wish to kill him; they may curse Nyikang; the *reth* may withhold the rains out of resentment of the people; the king and Nyikang raise armies and do battle with each other.

Only God seems to stand outside this, but only because God is so distant: in Nuer and Dinka cosmologies, where Divinity is a more immediate concern, we learn that the human condition was first created because of God’s (apparently unjustified)

---

<sup>2</sup> Though in this case made even more confusing by reversing the order in the second example. If this is not simply a mistake on the author’s part, it could be taken as a telling sign of the reversibility of some of these hierarchies.

Much of the difference turned on the status of women. In Buganda, women did almost all subsistence labor, while having no autonomous organizations of their own; men formed a largely parasitical stratum, the young ones organized into militarized bands, older ones into an endlessly elaborate administrative apparatus that seemed to function largely to keep the younger ones under control, or distracted in endless wars of conquest. The result was, by any definition, a bona fide state. It was also one of those rare cases when bureaucratization did not in any sense lead to any significant euphemization. While the king was not identified with any divine being, he remained very much a divine king in our sense of the term: a dispatcher of arbitrary violence, and higher justice, both at the same time. However, where the Shilluk king was surrounded by executioners whose role was eventually to kill him, the Ganda king was surrounded by executioners whose role was to kill everybody else. Thousands might be slaughtered during royal funerals, installations, or when the king periodically decided there were too many young men on the roads surrounding the capital, and it was time to round a few hundred up and hold a mass execution. Kings might be killed in rebellions, but none were ritually put to death. As Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1985: 277) aptly put it, regicide, here, seems to have been replaced by civicide.<sup>4</sup> When David Livingstone asked why the king killed so many people, he was told that if he didn’t, everyone would assume that he was dead.

Ray remarks that the capital was, as so often in such states, “a microcosm of the kingdom, laid out so that it reflected the administrative order of Buganda as a whole” (1991: 203); the king was the linchpin of the social cosmos, distributor of titles

---

<sup>4</sup> Probably literally: Christopher Wrigley, the grand old man of Ganda studies, makes a plausible case that what we are dealing with here is a very old and probably fairly typical institution of sacred kinship suddenly transformed, a few generations before, into a state (1996: 246). A bureaucracy was superimposed with disastrous results.

we now think of as “the people” or “the nation” emerges as a side-effect.

Rulers of early states—Egyptian and Mesoamerican pyramid-builders being only the most famous example—had a notorious tendency to develop obsessions with their own mortality. In a way this is not hard to understand; like Gilgamesh, having conquered every other enemy they could imagine, they were left to confront the one that they could never ultimately defeat. Killing others, in turn, does seem one of the few ways to achieve some sort of immortality. That is to say, most kings are aware that there are rulers remembered for reigns of peace, justice and prosperity, but they are rarely the ones remembered forever. If history will accord them permanent significance, it will most likely either be for one or two things: vast building projects (which often themselves entail the death of thousands) or wars of conquest. There is an almost literal vampirism here: ten thousand young Assyrians or Frenchmen must be wiped from existence, their own future histories aborted, so the name of Assurbanipal or Napoleon can live forever.

Shilluk refused to allow their *reths* to engage in this sort of behavior, but in the institutions of Frazerian sacred kingship we encounter the same relation in a far more subtle way. The connection is so subtle, in fact, that it has gone largely unnoticed. But it comes especially clearly into focus if one compares the Shilluk kingdom with its most notoriously brutal cousin: the kingdom of Buganda located on the shores of Lake Victoria a few hundred miles to the south. In many ways, the similarities between the two are quite remarkable. Ganda legends too trace the kingship back to a cosmic dilemma about the origins of death; here too, the first king did not die but mysteriously vanished in the face of popular discontent; here too, the next three kings vanished as well; here too, there were elaborate installation rituals with mock battles, the lighting of ritual fires, and a chaotic yearlong interregnum. Yet in other ways the Ganda kingship is an exact inversion.

anger against humans, and there are even stories of defiant humans trying to make war on God and on the rain (Lienhardt 1961: 43–44). Antagonism here appears to be the very principle of separation. Insofar as the *reth* is not Nyikang, it is first of all because the two sometimes stand in a relation of mutual hostility.

This too is fairly straightforward. Certainly, there are ambiguities—for instance, about how and whether the people themselves could be said to partake of divinity, since divinity is, after all, said to be present in everything—but these are the ambiguities typical of any such hierarchical system of encompassment.

Things get a little more complicated when one examines prayers offered directly to God. Here is one in Westermann, pronounced during a cattle sacrifice to cure someone who is sick:

There is no one above thee, thou God. Thou becamest the grandfather of Nyikango; it is thou (Nyikango) who walkest with God; thou becamest the grandfather (of man), and thy son Dak. If famine comes, is it not given by thee? So as this cow stands here, is it not thus: if she dies, does her blood not go to thee? Thou God, and thou who becamest Nyikango, and thy son Dak! But the soul (of man), is it not thine own? (1912: 171, also in Lienhardt 1952: 156).<sup>3</sup>

Here we have the same sort of hierarchical participation (God became Nyikang) but king is gone and Dak appears in his place:

Dak’s presence might not be entirely surprising here because it was most often Dak’s attacks that make people to sick

<sup>3</sup> Actually Westermann claims this is the only prayer offered directly to God but Hofmayr (1925: 197–201) and Oyler (1918a: 283) both produce other ones (viz. Seligman 1934: 5).

to begin with. If so Dak, however much subordinated, also represents the active principle that sets everything off. This often seems to be his function.

Certainly, Dak is nothing if not active. This is especially obvious when Dak is paired with Nyikang, which he normally is. Nyikang's effigy is larger and heavier; it is clearly meant to embody the *gravitas* and dignity of authority. His image thus tends to stay near the center of things. In ordinary times, the effigy remains in the temple at Akurwa even when Dak's effigy leaves it to tour the country; when the two do travel together, it is always Dak who moves about, interacts, while Nyikang takes on a more "statesmanlike" reserve (Schnepel 1988:437). True, one could argue this is simply a consequence of Dak's subordinate status: Nyikang is the authoritative center, Dak his worldly representative, his errand-boy. But even here there are ambiguities. Most strikingly, while Dak is smaller than Nyikang, he towers above him, always being carried atop an eight foot pole. Nyikang, in contrast, stays close to the ground; in fact his effigy is often held parallel to the ground, while Dak's is ordinarily vertical. Similar ambiguities appear in stories about the two hero's lives. Sometimes, especially in his youth, it is Dak who is always getting himself in trouble and Nyikang with his magical power who has to step in to save him. But later, during the conquest of Shillukland, it is more likely to be the other way around: Nyikang is foiled by some problem, and Dak proves more ingenious, or more resourceful with a spear, and manages to solve it.

There is also the peculiar feature of Cal, Nyikang's feckless older son who never accomplishes anything and whose image appears only when the effigies' forces lose. Dak and Cal seem to represent opposites: pure aggression versus absolute passivity, with Nyikang again defining the center. Yet in what way is Nyikang superior if one is more like the useless Cal?

What I would suggest is that this is not just a dilemma of interpretation for the outside analyst; it reflects a fundamental

tokens—or at least the overwhelming majority. In this sense the kind is indeed an abstraction or transcendental principle: the ideal-typical human, though here I am using the phrase not in Weber's sense, but rather, from the understanding that, like Leonardo da vinci, when we try to imagine the typical, we usually instead end up generating the ideal.<sup>3</sup> Insofar as the *reth* is the embodiment of the nation, and of humanity as a whole before the divine powers; insofar as he is the generic human, he must be the perfect human. Insofar as he is an image of humanity removed from time and process, he must be preserved from any harmful transformation until the point where, when this becomes impossible, he must be simply destroyed and put away. In the sense the king's body is less a fetish than itself a kind of micro-utopia, an impossible ideal.

There is always, I think, a certain utopian element in the sacred. That which is sacred is not only set apart from the mundane world, it is set apart particularly from the world of time and process, of birth, growth, decay, and also, simple bodily functions, ways in which the body is continuous with the world. I have explored this phenomenon in detail elsewhere (Graeber 1997). What is most striking in the case of sacred kingship, this is reflected above all in an urge to deny the king's mortality; and this denial is almost invariably effected by killing people.

To put it in the terms of my three proposals from the first section: there is a kind of circle here. on the one hand, insofar the dangers of divine kingship are contained by the rituals of sacred kingship, the utopian element, the degree to which kings represent a magical resolution of the dilemmas of human existence, themselves become a kind of sacred trap. But ultimately the utopia itself can only be maintained through terror. What

---

<sup>3</sup> This is of course what "ideal" actually means: it is the idea lying behind some category.

natural disasters are likely to result. Hence the principle, so common in Africa, that kings ought not to die a natural death.

For this reason the king “must keep himself in a state of ritual purity,” as Evans-Pritchard stressed, and also, “a state of physical perfection” (1948: 20). All sources agree on this latter point, and it is a common feature of sacred kingship. A legitimate candidate to the throne must not only be strong and healthy, he must have no scars, blemishes, missing teeth, asymmetrical features, undescended testicles, deformities, and so forth. What’s more his bodily integrity must be fastidiously maintained, particularly at ritual moments: we are told that if during the installation ceremonies the *reth* is injured in any way, “even if the king is only punched and blood appears” (Singer in Schnepel 1988: 444), he was immediately disqualified for office. For this reason some sources insist kings could not even fight in war, but were rather borne along as a kind of standard while others were fighting; historical narratives suggest this was not always the case, but certainly, if the king were seriously injured, this could not be allowed to stand, and he would be discreetly dispatched.

The very idea of physical perfection is revealing. What does it mean to say someone is physically perfect? Presumably that they correspond to some idealized model of what a human is supposed to be like. But how do we even know what humans are supposed to be like? There is only one way: by observing actual humans. But actual humans are never physically perfect; in fact, when compared with the model of generic human we have in our heads, most seem at least slightly wrong, too short, too fat, too thin, misshapen. This is partly because when moving from tokens to types, we wipe out change and process: real humans grow, age, and so on; generic humans are, first of all, caught forever at some idealized moment of their lives. But it is also an effect of the process of generalization itself: in moving from tokens to types, we always seem to generate something which we find more proper or appealing than the

dilemma about the nature of political power that Shilluk tend to find as confusing as anybody else. Rituals can be interpreted as ways of puzzling out such problems, even as, simultaneously, they are also ways of making concrete political change in the world.

Critical here is the role of the interregnum, the “year of fear.” Wherever there are kings, interregna tend to be seen as periods of chaos, violence, times when the very cosmological order is thrown into disarray. But as Bernhardt Schnepel (1988: 450) justly points out, this is the reason most monarchies try to keep them as brief as possible. There is no particular reason those organizing the Shilluk installation ceremonies could not have declared, say, a three to five-day period of chaos and terror—in fact, by the 1970s, that’s exactly what they did decide to do, abandoning the year-long interregnum entirely (ibid.: 443). If for centuries before they didn’t, it indicates, if nothing else, that this year of fear was fundamentally important.

Its importance, I think, is the key to understanding the importance of Dak as well. During the interregnum, royal politics, ordinarily bottled up in the figure of the *reth*, overflows into society at large. The result is constant peril. During this period Nyikang is gone, and Dak alone remains. The return to normalcy begins with the stage of “preparations,” conducted under Dak’s general aegis, and often, under his direct supervision. Expeditions set out to appropriate the materials with which to reconstruct the royal office, starting with the effigies. They uproot plants, they hunt and kill animals, they ambush and plunder camps and caravans. Nor do they limit their depredations to foreigners. They “take what they like” from Shilluk communities as well.

Dak’s expeditions, then, represent indiscriminate predatory violence directed at every aspect of creation: vegetable, animal, every sort of human being. As I have pointed out, “indiscriminate” in this context also means “universal.” ordinarily, when one is in the presence of a power that can rain destruction

equally on anyone and everyone, that is what Shilluk refer to as Juok, or God.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that Dak is God (or, to be more precise, it is. God is Dak, but Dak is not God.) Dak is the human capacity to act like God, to mimic his capricious, predatory destructiveness. In the stories, this is how he first appears: raining death and disaster arbitrarily. From his own perspective “taking what he likes.” From the perspective of his victims, playing God. During the interregnum then, it is not just royal politics that spills over into society at large; it is divine power itself—the violent, arbitrary divine power that is, as Shilluk institutions ensured no one could ever forget, the real essence and origin of royalty.

Of course God (Juok) is not simply a force of destruction—he is also, originally, the creator of everything—and it is probably worth noting that this is also the only point in the ceremonies where anyone really makes or fashions anything. Still, this is not what’s emphasized. What is emphasized is appropriation, which is perhaps the most distinctly human form of activity. Through a combination of appropriation and creation, Dak’s people thus fashion Nyikang. Once they have done so, and Nyikang returns, he (unlike Dak) limits his depredations to his own Shilluk nation, retracing his original journey of conquest. But there seems to be a calculated ambiguity here. Do the Shilluk become Shilluk—Nyikang’s subjects—because they collectively construct Nyikang (the classic fetish king, created

---

<sup>4</sup> God seems particularly immanent in violence or destruction. The above-cited prayer says “spear-thrusts are of Juok”, and one of the few ways that God was regularly invoked in common speech is when people call out “why, God?” when someone falls seriously ill. Among related Nilotic speakers in Uganda, “anything to do with killing must have *juok* in it” (Mogenson 2002: 424). On the other hand, in formal speech, God, so absent from the everyday life of ordinary Shilluk, pervades every aspect of royal existence. When speaking with members of the royal clan, one can never speak of their going someplace, or getting up, or staying someplace, or entering a house, instead they are “taken by God” to that place, “lifted by God,” “nursed by God,” “stuffed in the house by God,” and so on (Pumphreys 1937).

institutions. Those political institutions, he insisted, appeared to be designed to prevent arbitrary coercive authority from ever developing. If states ever could emerge in this environment (and it seems apparent now that, in certain periods of history, they did) it could only be through figures like the Tupi-Gurani prophets, who called on their followers to abandon their existing customs and communities to embark on a quest for a “land without evil,” an imaginary utopia where all would become as gods free of birth and death, the earth would yield its bounty without labor, and all social restrictions could therefore be set aside (H. Clastres 1995). The state can only arise from such absolutist claims, and above all, from an explicit break with the word of kinship. Luc de Heusch’s original insight on African kingship (1962) as having to mark an explicit break with the domestic order anticipates such arguments. Obviously he was to take it in what might seem a very different direction. But how different is it really?

Certainly, Shilluk kings do share certain qualities with Nuer and Dinka prophets, even if unlike them they don’t predict the coming of a new world where all human dilemmas will be resolved.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the organization of the royal capital did represent a kind of partial unraveling of the dilemmas of the human condition. But we can also consider de Heusch’s idea of the “body-fetish.” The reader will recall that the basic idea here is that rituals of installation turn the king’s own physical person into the equivalent of a magical charm; he is the kingdom, its milk and its grain, and any danger to the king’s bodily integrity is thus a threat to the safety and prosperity kingdom as a whole. If he grows old and sickly, defeats, crop failures and

---

<sup>2</sup> Specially, kings were like prophets seen as being possessed by divine spirits (Shilluk prophets, when they appeared, were often possessed by Nyikang), mediated disputes on a national level that local authorities could not deal with, and relied on a following of young men who were themselves cut off from the ordinary domestic order because, having no access to cattle, they could not ordinarily expect to marry.

ally emerged appears to have been brilliantly successful in creating and maintaining a sense of a unified nation, capable of defending itself and usually dominating the surrounding territories, without ever giving the royals with their fractious politics much chance to play havoc with local affairs. Above all, ordinary Shilluk appear to have resisted the emergence of anything resembling an administrative system. Communications between Fashoda and other settlements were maintained not by officials, but principally by relations with and between royal sisters, wives and daughters. Any attempt at creating systematic tribute relations, at home or abroad, appears to have been met with such immediate and widespread protest the very legitimacy of the kingship was soon called into question. As a result the royal treasury, such as it was, consisted almost entirely of wealth that had been stolen—seized in raids against foreigners, or against Shilluk communities that resisted attempts to mediate disputes. The playful raiding during installation rituals was simply a reminder of what everyone already knew: that predatory violence was and would always remain the essence of sovereignty. Above all, there seemed to be an at least implicit understanding that such matters ought not be in any way obfuscated—that the euphemization of power was essential to any project of its permanent institutionalization, and this was precisely what most people did not wish to see.

My use of the term “utopia” is somewhat unconventional in this context. By “utopia,” I mean any place that represents an unattainable ideal, particularly, an impossible resolution of the basic dilemmas of human existence—however those might be conceived. Utopia is the place where contradictions are resolved.<sup>1</sup> Part of my inspiration here is Pierre Clastres’ argument (1977) that among the Amazonian societies he knew, states could never have developed out of existing political

---

<sup>1</sup> Or better put, the place where existential dilemmas are reduced to contradictions, so that they can be resolved.

by his people) or because he then goes on to conquer them (the classic divine king, raining disaster or the threat of disaster equally on all)?

The interregnum, then, is a time when divine power suffuses everything. This is what makes the creation of society possible. It is also what makes the creation of society necessary, since it results in an undifferentiated state of chaos and at least potential violence of all against all. Social order—like cosmic order—comes of separation, and the resultant creation of a relatively balanced, stable set of antagonisms. That one is, in fact, dealing with divine power here is confirmed by stories about the nature of the election itself. The electoral college is made up primarily of commoners, with a few royal representatives, but many insisted that “in former times” a delegation from the Nuba kingdom, the ancient allies of Nyikang, performed a ritual, a “fire ordeal,” involving throwing either sticks or pebbles in a fire, that ensured that the new *reth* was chosen directly by God (Westermann 1912: 122; Hofmayr 1925: 451). Even in current times, the election is taken to represent God’s choice: this is what allows the *reth* to tell the chief of Deballo that he is the man “sent by God to rule the land of the Shilluk” (Lienhardt 1952: 157).<sup>5</sup> The people and God are here interchangeable.

With Nyikang’s return, God leaves the picture, and Dak is again reduced to his father’s deputy. Divinity begins to be properly bottled up. Nyikang may continue Dak’s predatory ways, looting and pillaging as he reenacts his conquests, but it has all become something of a burlesque.

Over the course of the ceremonies, Nyikang’s spirit, having been coaxed out of the river, is transferred first into the effigy, then, just as reluctantly, into the body of the *reth*-elect. In doing so, Nyikang is also moving forward in history: from his

---

<sup>5</sup> The presence of foreigners here—even if legendary—seems to be a reminder of the universality of the divine principle. Note too the opposition between this “fire ordeal” in which the candidate is chosen by God, and the “water ordeal” in which he is confirmed by Nyikang.

birth from the river in mythic times, to his heroic exploits in the beginning of Shilluk history, to his current incarnation in the body of a contemporary king. If we look at what is happening in the South, surrounding the candidate, however, we see a very different kind of drama. I have already mentioned the contrast between the water symbolism surrounding Nyikang and the fire symbolism surrounding the king. This is also a juxtaposition of mortality and eternity. Nyikang might be constructed, but he is constructed of eternal materials. (There will always be a river, just as there will always be ostriches and bamboo.) He then moves from the generic—and thus timeless—to the increasingly particular, and hence historic. But he will never actually die, just disappear and begin the cycle all over again. The king on the other hand is from the start surrounded by reminders of his own mortality.

If the fires are the most obvious of these reminders, the most important are surely the Ororo. The Ororo preside over every aspect of the king's mortality. As degraded nobility, their very existence is a reminder that royal status is not eternal: that kings have children, that most of them will not be kings; that eventually, royal status itself will pass away. In royal ritual, Ororo have a jurisdiction over everything that pertains to sexuality and death. They are the men who carry out the sacrifices for the king by spearing and roasting animals, they are the women that wash, shave, and seduce the king; they will provide his highest-ranking wives; they protect but eventually kill him; they officiate over the decomposition and burial of his corpse. Throughout the ceremonies, the *reth*-elect is surrounded by Ororo. When he is defeated and seized by Nyikang, he is plucked from amidst his own mortality.

This is not to say that the *reth* is ever more than “temporarily” immortal. Even after his capture, the Ororo soon return.

This theme plays itself out throughout the ceremony. If the drama in the North is about the gradual containment of arbitrary, divine power, the drama in the South is about human vul-

(except perhaps in his immediate presence). But it is also clear that the apparatus of sacred kingship is a very effective way of managing those who do.

Here I introduce my second cross-cultural generalization. The sacred, everywhere, is seen as something that is or should be set apart. As much as an object becomes the embodiment of a transcendental principle or abstraction, so much is it to be kept apart from the muck and mire of ordinary human life, and surrounded, therefore, with restrictions. These are the kind of principles of separation that Nuer and Dinka, at least, refer to with the word *thek*, usually translated “respect.” violent men almost invariably insist on tokens of respect, but tokens of respect taken to the cosmological level—“not to touch the earth,” “not to see the sun”—tend to become severe limits on one's freedom to act violently. If nothing else the violence can, as in the Shilluk case, be bottled up, limited to a specific royal sphere which is under ordinary circumstances scrupulously set apart from ordinary daily affairs.

We will never know the exact circumstances under which Shilluk royal institutions came into being, but the broad outlines seem fairly clear. The ancestors of the Shilluk were likely in most essentials barely distinguishable from their Nuer or Dinka neighbors—fiercely egalitarian pastoralists who settled along an unusually fertile stretch of the Nile. There they became more sedentary, more populous, but also began regularly raiding their neighbors for cattle, wealth and food. To some degree this appears to have been born of necessity; to some degree, it no doubt became a matter of glory and adventure. An incipient class of war chieftains emerged who assembled wealth in the form of cattle, women, and retainers. They became the ancestors of Shilluk royalty. However, the royal clan itself only appears to have developed, at least in the form it eventually took, after a prolonged struggle over the nature of the emerging political order, the role of women, and the power and jurisdiction of commoner chiefs. The compromise that eventu-



the justice of God—than adherents of Abrahamic religions were necessarily willing to acknowledge.

Though to some degree, too, they deal with issues that are universal.

It would have to be so, or it would not be possible to make cross-cultural generalizations about “divine kingship,” “sacred kingship,” or “scapegoats” to begin with. This essay is really founded on two such generalizations. The first is that it is one of the misfortunes of humanity that we share a tendency to see the successful prosecution of arbitrary violence as in some sense divine, or at least, to identify it with some kind of transcendental power. It is not entirely clear why this should be. Perhaps it has something to do with the utterly disproportionate quality of violence, the enormous gap between action and effect. It takes decades to bring forth and shape a human being; a few seconds to bring all that to nothing by driving a spear into him. It takes very little effort to drop a bomb; unimaginable effort to have to learn to get about without legs for the rest of one’s life because one no longer has any as the result of one. Even more, acts of arbitrary violence are acts that for the victims and their friends and families must necessarily have enormous significance, but have no intrinsic meaning. Meaning after all implies intentionality. But the definition of “arbitrary” is that there is no particular reason why one person was shot or blown up and another wasn’t. Such acts are therefore by definition meaningless; this is just what allows arbitrary acts of weather to be referred to as “acts of God.” Meaning abhors a vacuum. Particularly when we are dealing with actions or events of enormous significance, it is hard to resist the tendency to ascribe some kind of transcendental meaning, or at least to assume that one exists. It is in this absolute absence of meaning that we encounter the Divine.

Of course this is only a potential. As I remarked earlier, it is not as if any bandit who finds himself in a position to wreak havoc with impunity is necessarily going to be treated as a god

nerability. The *reth*-to-be is mocked, treated as a child, forced to ride backwards on an ox. His followers never wield arbitrary power over humans. Unlike Dak and Nyikang, they do not loot or plunder or hold passers-by for ransom. They do, however, constantly offer animals up for sacrifice. Just about every significant action of the king is marked by his stepping over (thus, consecrating) some animal that is later sacrificed.<sup>6</sup> In one sense this is the exact opposite of what Nyikang and Dak are doing. Sacrificial meat is redistributed,<sup>7</sup> so instead of stealing live beasts, he is distributing the flesh of dead ones. This is especially significant since, when presiding over sacrifices meant to resolve feuds, Shilluk kings have been known to state quite explicitly that the flesh and blood of the animal he sacrifices should be considered as his own (Oyler 1920: 298). Since in ordinary Shilluk sacrifices the life and blood of the creature (unlike the flesh) are said to “go up to God”—and to Nyikang—it would seem the king is here playing the part of humanity as a whole, placing himself in a willfully subordinate position to the cosmic powers that will ultimately take hold of him.

In a larger sense, sacrifice—in all Nilotic religions the paradigmatic ritual—is about the re-establishment of boundaries.<sup>8</sup> Divinity has entered into the world; the ordinary divisions of the cosmos (for instance, between humans, animals, and gods) have become confused; the result is illness or catastrophe. So while sacrifice is, here as everywhere, a way of entering into communication with the Divine, it is ultimately

---

<sup>6</sup> It happens so often that most such examples I actually purged from my account, above, to avoid monotony.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that Nyikang’s passage does not include some acts of sacrifice, since otherwise there could be no feasts; only that this is not a particularly important aspect of what he does. With the king it is clearly otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> In the absence of any detailed published material on Shilluk sacrifice, I am drawing here on Evans-Pritchard (1954, 1956) on the Nuer, but even more Lienhardt’s work on the Dinka (1961) and Beidelman’s (1966a, 1981) reinterpretations of this material.

a way of putting Divinity back in its proper place. If the interregnum, the reign of Dak, is a time of indiscriminate violence against every aspect of creation, sacrifice is about restoring discriminations: respect (*thek*) to use the Nuer/Dinkaphrase,<sup>9</sup> separation, appropriate distance. In this sense, the entire installation ceremony is a kind of sacrifice, or at least does the same thing that a sacrifice is ordinarily meant to do. It restores a world of separations.

Of course, if the ritual is a kind of sacrifice, it is reasonable to ask: who is the victim? The *reth*-elect? A case could be made. The ceremony begins with the people informing the candidate that they wish to kill him. During his time in Deballo, he is treated very much like an ox being prepared for sacrifice: sacrificial oxen, too, are secluded, manhandled and mocked—even while those who mock them also confess their sins (Lienhardt 1961: 292–95).<sup>10</sup> Then in the end the ox’s death becomes the token of a newly created community, its unity brought into concrete being in the sharing of the animal’s flesh. Here one could almost see the humiliated princely candidate in a messianic role, giving of himself to man and god, sacrificing himself in the name of Shilluk unity. But if so, there’s an obvious objection. He doesn’t seem to be sacrificing very much. To the contrary: the ceremonies end with the new king happily installed in Fashoda, accepting the allegiance of his subjects, inspecting the buildings, reassembling a harem, perhaps, if so inclined, plotting bloody revenge on those who had formerly insulted him.

---

<sup>9</sup> The Shilluk cognate appears to be *pak*, usually translated “praise,” which also refers to specialized formal language used within and between clans (see Crazzolara 1951: 140142). As usual, though, there isn’t enough material on Shilluk custom to make a sustained comparison.

<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, I am relying here on Lienhardt’s detailed description and analysis of Dinka sacrifice, supplemented by Evans-Pritchard’s Nuer ethnography, but this is as I say because no parallel Shilluk account exists. For what it’s worth Evans-Pritchard (1954: 28) felt it appropriate to use Shilluk statements to throw light on Nuer practices.

## Some words by way of conclusion

I have framed my argument in cosmological terms because I believe one cannot understand political institutions without understanding the people that create them, what they believe the world to be like, how they imagine the human situation within it, and what they believe it is possible or legitimate to want from it. While every cosmology is in a certain sense unique, anyone coming at this material from a background in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is unlikely to feel on entirely unfamiliar ground here—certainly, much more familiar ground than when dealing with Polynesian or Amazonian cosmologies. There is a reason early anthropologists often saw Nilotic peoples as the closest living cousins of the Biblical patriarchs: not only are Semitic and Nilotic languages distantly connected, in each case we are dealing with semi-nomadic pastoralists, monotheists with a lineage-based form of organization. While many of the earliest ethnographers, such as Seligman himself, used such similarities to make explicit racist arguments that all that they considered the real achievements African civilization were a result of migrations from the Middle East, the problem here was simply the assumption that the similarities were somehow created by “higher civilizations” from outside, rather than being, in a sense already there because the ancestors of African and Middle Eastern pastoralists were simply more similar in their existential concerns—their way of framing the basic dilemmas of human existence—the reasons for suffering,

without childbirth, a place of ease and pleasure, devoid of hunger, sickness and death.

The paradise however is temporary, and the solution always provisional, incomplete. Arbitrary violence can never be entirely eliminated. Heaven and earth cannot really be brought together, except during momentary thundershowers. And even the simulation of paradise is bought at a terrible price.

Still, all this is temporary. The king is, ultimately, destined to die a ritual death.

So is the king a sacrificial victim on temporary reprieve? I would say in a certain sense he is. Every act of sacrifice does, after all, contain its utopian moment. Here, it is as if the king is suspended inside that utopian moment indefinitely—or at least, so long as his strength holds out.

Let me explain what I mean by this. Normally, this utopian moment in sacrifice is experienced first and foremost in the feast, after the animal is dead, when the entire community is brought together for the collective enjoyment of its flesh. Often this is a community that has been created, patched together from previously unrelated or even hostile factions, by the ceremony itself. Even if that is not the case, they must put aside any prior differences. According to Lienhardt, for Dinka, such moments of communal harmony are the closest one can come to the direct experience of God—or, to be more specific, God in his aspect of benevolent universality:

In Divinity the Dinka image their experience of the ways in which human beings everywhere resemble each other, and in a sense form a single community with one original ancestor created by one Creator... When, therefore, a prophet like Arianhdit shows that he is able to make peace between normally exclusive and hostile communities, to persuade them to observe between them the peaceful conventions which they had previously observed only internally, and to unite people of different origins in a single community, he proves that he is a 'man of Divinity'... A man is recognized as a powerful 'man of Divinity' because he creates for people the experience of peace between men and of the uniting of forces which are normally opposed

to each other, of which Divinity is understood to be the grounds (1961: 157).

It is in this sense that God “also represents truth, justice, honesty, uprightness,” and so on (1961: 158). It is not because God, as a conscious entity, is just. In fact, Dinka—like most Nilotic peoples—seem haunted by the strong suspicion that he isn’t. It is because truth, justice, etc. are the necessary grounds for “order and peace in human relations,” and therefore, truth, justice, etc. *are* God. The point of sacrificial ritual then is to move from one manifestation of the divine to the other: from God as confusion and disaster, to God as unity and peace. Normally it is the feast which seems to act as the primary experience of God, but often the divine element takes even more concrete form in the undigested grass extracted from the cow’s stomach. It seems significant that the one *shilluk* sacrifice for which we have any sort of description—other than those meant to bring the rain—is aimed at creating peace between two parties to a feud (Oyler 1920b). The *reth* here plays the part of the Dinka prophet. After he emphasizes that the ox’s flesh and blood are really his own, the animal is speared, and the chyme, the half-digested grass in question, used to anoint the former feuding parties. “That was done to show their united condition” (ibid.: 299).<sup>11</sup> Nuer insist that chyme is, like the blood and more generally the “life,” the part of the sacrificed animal that belongs to God (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 212; Evens 1989: 338). Generally speaking, in Nilotic ritual, chyme<sup>12</sup> is treated as the stuff of pure potential: it is grass in the process of becoming flesh; undifferentiated substance in the way of creative transformation. As such it is itself the pure embodiment of life. It seems to me that this is

<sup>11</sup> “The thought was that the animal eats a bit here and there, but in the stomach it all becomes one mass. Even so the individuals of the two factions were to become one.” (Oyler 1920b: 299).

<sup>12</sup> And also chyle, which is the further digested grass in the animal’s second stomach. This is the stuff even more closely identified with life but I thought I would spare the reader all the niceties of bovine digestive anatomy.

the utopian moment in which the *reth* is suspended. Not only is he, as *reth*, the ground for “order and peace in human relations,” of unity and hence of justice, he is the person actually responsible for mediating and resolving disputes. This then is the social equivalent of rain, and chyme, like falling water, is the very physical substance of the divine in its most benevolent aspect. All this is stated almost explicitly in the peace sacrifice: the king is the ox, he is God, he is peace, he is the unity of all his subjects. This too, is how the *reth* can be both sacrificial victim in suspense, and living in a kind of small version of paradise.

The installation ritual begins with a nightmare vision of a world infused with divine power, in which no separations exist, and all human relations are therefore tinged with potential violence. It is the worst kind of unity of God and world. It ends with the restoration of the best kind. In this sense, it is the transformation of divine king into sacred king. Dak, in his untrammelled form, embodies the former. The proceedings seem to be based on the assumption that the primordial truth of power—that it is arbitrary violence—has to be acknowledged so it can then be contained. one might argue the two main forms of sacred kingship identified by Luc de Heusch are the two principle strategies for doing this. Each plays itself out in a different division of the country. In the North, divine power is reduced to a fetish—literally, an effigy—which is constructed by, and hence to some degree therefore manageable by ordinary humans. In the South we see the making of a classic scapegoat king. Ultimately the two become one: the king not only becomes Nyikang, he also, at least momentarily, becomes an effigy. Ordered, hierarchical relations (God-Nyikang-king-people) are restored. The new king is (as Dak was originally) in a sense all of them at once, even as he is also the means to keep them apart, suspended in a kind of balanced antagonism. As such he is a victim himself suspended, temporarily, in miniature version of the original unity of Heaven of Earth, in a strange village with sex but