

SUMMARY OF KINGS OF DISASTER: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan by Simon Simonse

Kings of Disaster is a comparative, ethnographic study of the political systems of the the Bari, Lulubo, Lokoya, Pari and Lotuho, peoples who inhabit the East Bank of the Nile in Equatoria, South Sudan. These political systems are structured by the principle of *consensual antagonism*, the king operating as the unifying antagonist of the combined segments that constitute his people. *Regicide* as it is practiced by these peoples is a direct consequence of the king's role as political antagonist. Kingship ritual is an unmistakable makeover of the *scapegoat mechanism*, the model of consensual antagonism as René Girard first formulated it, the king's installation being framed as the capture of an unwilling victim while his natural death is dramatized as a *double transfiguration*, as demon and as god.

The book has four parts. *Part One* presents the theoretical framework and the historical setting. The dozen or so kingdoms where information was collected vary in size – between a thousand and a hundred thousand subjects per king. They practice a dual system of governance; on one side are the king/rainmaker and his clan, clients and other followers, on the other side the *monyomiji*, the age-grade of middle-aged men who rule as a corporate group for a fixed period varying from 10 and 24 years. The book is about the dynamic relationship between the kings and their peoples, the latter being normally represented by their *monyomiji*. The two core responsibilities of the *monyomiji* are warfare and the management of the relationship with the king. They ensure that the king provides the community with a timely and well-dosed supply of rain. They keep him happy by meeting his demands since royal anger is bad for the rain. When the rains fail, the *monyomiji* carry out investigations and take measures against any group or person suspected of intentionally or accidentally stopping the rain. If drought persists, the blame will be put on the king. The *monyomiji* will confront him, if necessary use force in obtaining a confession regarding the cause of the disaster. During a king's career, periods during which he is worshipped like a god alternate with episodes of vicious confrontation when he is demonized, tortured, or even killed when a stand-off with the *monyomiji* escalates beyond repair.

Part Two, 'Dualism', analyzes the nature of relations between territorial units and age- and generation based groups using Evans-Pritchard's model of complementary, segmentary opposition. Confrontation and competition are decisive. When disputes between sections or age-groups cannot be resolved by negotiation, the conflict parties organize a stick fight. The winner is put in the right. A more or less fragile balance of power defines group relations.

Part Three, 'Centralism', deals with the relationship between king and people. King and people deal with one another according to the same principle of complementary opposition that is at work between corporate groups. Both king and *monyomiji* are jealous of their power and keenly intent on making the power balance tilt in their favour. As a rule, the balance will swing back and forth, one year the king may be calling the shots, next year it is the *monyomiji*.

In situations of war the competition between different kingdoms overrides internal divisions king and *monyomiji* making common cause. When kings have the full support of the warrior class they obtain a *de facto* control over the legitimate use of force - the Weberian criterion that distinguishes states from pre-state social formations. A state-like configuration emerges that has characteristics in common with historic states: *regimes* of king and *monyomiji* try to stay in power by preventing the junior generation from taking over. This can result in outright

repression of juniors who resist the new *regime* and who go into exile as happened in Imatari in the middle of the nineteenth century and in Lafon in the beginning of the twentieth century.

From an evolutionary perspective these regimes can be considered *cases of attempted endogenous state formation*. They refute the widely held consensus that the first states could only have been the result of conquest. This evidence also refutes the time-honoured anthropological consensus that there is a deep divide between the power dynamic animating stateless, segmentary, societies and the one that makes centralized, hierarchical, systems tick. The closing of ranks between the king and *monyomiji*, evoked in the previous paragraph, is a perfect example of complementary opposition: the more inclusive social segments that compose the political body of the kingdom merge when confronted with a political entity of the same order of inclusion.

When a war was over, there were two possible scenarios for the aftermath. In case of a victory of the kingdom (= the merger of king and *monyomiji*), either another enemy would be picked to consolidate the emerging state configuration, or, depending on the phase in the cycle of generational succession and the restlessness of the junior generation, king and *monyomiji* prioritized internal stability and consolidated their grip on the upcoming generation.

If the war ended in defeat, the coalition of king and *monyomiji* was likely to fall apart, offering chances to the new generation, leaving a weakened, vulnerable king behind. Local oral traditions tell about *monyomiji* abnegating their king altogether to the point of abolishing the institution of kingship (Chapter 15). These traditions are evidence of a back and forth between horizontal segmentary antagonism and vertical king-people antagonism. Because of the proneness to rivalry in the royal family, coupled with the antagonism between territorial segments and successive generations, these early kingdoms striving for statehood remained very fragile indeed. This fragility may be the reason that examples of similar configurations are rare in the ethnographic literature.

Part Four zooms in on the king as scapegoat. In his role as his people's unifying adversary, the king becomes ultimate target of blame when the community is stricken by disaster. The case-studies show that the lynching of the king is not an impulsive, collective act. The build-up of tension is slow, of a political nature. Alternative wrongdoers are scrutinized and all sorts of remedies are tried before the collective anger converges on the king. In line with the logic of segmentary antagonism the killing community justifies the killing as an act of revenge. *Kings of Disaster* presents more than twenty cases, some of them contemporary to the field work, in which kings or queens lost their lives in confrontations with their united subjects. These cases are undisputable evidence that the practice of regicide on the Upper Nile on which Frazer had built his majestic *The Golden Bough* really existed. The practice was disputed by later anthropologists who pointed at the ambiguity of the ethnographic evidence and argued that early observers had been misled by colonial perceptions.

The king is not only a scapegoat in what is fundamentally a political game. His career as king is ritualized as a deferred victimhood. From the day of his installation (staged as a capture, a deliberate contamination with his people's diseases, or a condemnation), he is his people's hostage. If he has not been killed in a confrontation over drought or another collective mishap, his blessings are released at the time of his natural death. The king's death is ritualized as a process in which the divine and the demonic powers inhabiting him are separated so that only the beneficial ones are retained for his people. The 'effective divinity of the king' is made to

coincide with a process of dying that takes place in successive stages and extends over at least one cultivation cycle- from the king's last breath, through the bloating and decomposition of his corpse, to the final exhumation and placement of his skull or bones in a shrine. For the Bari, Lulubo, Lokoya and Lotuho digestion is the model for the purification of the blessings: they plug the orifices of the king's body so that unprocessed body contents do not escape and cause disorder. For the Pari – and their well-documented Shilluk relatives to the north - the focus of control is on the king's breathing which must be stopped before it stops by itself. This strongly suggests that the much-debated Shilluk practice of having the king suffocated when he is on the brink of death is in same category of practices as the plugging of the orifices of his more southerly colleagues. The suffocation ensures the orderly release of the king's blessings; it is not a vestige of regicide, or a piece of colonial imagination.

Kings of Disaster is a demonstration of the heuristic value of René Girard's concept of the scapegoat mechanism in anthropological analyses not only of kingship ritual but also of political systems as a whole. The dynamic of complementary segmentary opposition which is so prominent in these societies, is just another instance of consensual antagonism or of the 'enemy scenario of the scapegoat mechanism' using the terminology proposed in the book.