

Divine King or Divine Right: Models of Ritual Authority

The difference between "primitive" and industrial "Western" societies, Levi-Strauss tells us (Charbonnier 1969, pp. 32-42), is something like that between grandfather clocks and steam-engines, between mechanical repetition and the struggle between entropy and "temperature" differentiation. In distinguishing between kings who rule by divine right ("divine kings" in Hocart's (1927) sense) and leaders who are themselves the embodiment of divinity, we shall examine here a phenomenon that may be suggestively considered in terms of these two poles. On the one hand, we have the identification of spiritual authority with temporal power or the subjugation of the former to the latter: this, in the comparative terms required by the model, characterizes "hot" societies. In the contrasted extreme, we have an egalitarian dispersal of ritual and political functions in economically and technologically simple societies. Most of the societies to be considered fall between the two poles; indeed, the "mechanical" model, as should become clear, can hardly be more than a kind of processual absolute zero - a useful construct, but empirically unrealised. The ethnographic comparisons presented here are conceived in the idiom of what Needham (1970) has called "structural history".

Karl Marx acutely pinpointed the distinction, in nineteenth-century Germany, between the "official" rule of the aristocrats and the effective rule, or "domination", of the bourgeoisie. There is, perhaps, something incongruous in representing the Junker class as in some sense ritual office-holders; but a point of structural interest remains, that it is possible in a highly "conservative" society for economic and nominal power to be quite differently distributed. In India, again, the Brahmans are invested with undeniable superiority in all matters relating to ritual, but they rarely constitute a locally recognised "dominant caste". And, to bring this introduction nearer to one of the main ethnographic theatres with which we shall be concerned, the leopard-skin chiefs of the Nuer are never members of the dominant clans in the tribes in which they function (Evans-Pritchard 1940, p. 174). The Nuer closely approach the "mechanical" model, as is shown particularly by their practice of telescoping lineage history to fit a conventional generational length; and their society has been described as having an essentially egalitarian character. Among the Shilluk, the dominant lineage (dyil) is linked with the soil (Evans-Pritchard : 1948), which suggests a connection between dominance and a combination of numerical strength with landholding, whether or not this is paralleled in the sphere of ritual authority; this is essentially true of the Indian case as well.

The Shilluk provide the classic focal point for a discussion of "divine kinship", as a result of Evans-Pritchard's well-known essay (1948) on the status and significance of the Shilluk reth. Much of his discussions is taken up by the question of whether the reth was actually immolated before he could meet a natural death; Evans-Pritchard was at the time disposed to doubt the authenticity of ritual regicide, though Lienhardt (1961, p. 314) subsequently showed that among the Dinka the evidence for it was quite definite (if "regicide" may be used for the killing of "masters of the fishing

spear", a less exclusive office than that of the Shilluk reth). However, as Evans-Pritchard himself points out, the significant fact is that the Shilluk evidently believe that their "kings" had been ritually killed; we should thus expect to seek the meaning of the office of the reth partly in this belief. His explanation of the stories of how the reth had been "walled in" to die as deriving from the traditional form of royal tomb rather begs the question; the historical development may equally have been the other way about, the present kind of tomb being a skeuomorph of a putative "original" suffocation chamber.

Frazer (1922, p. 350) explained away the killing of the reth in terms of his own theory of magic: "Whereas by slaying him his worshippers could, in the first place, make sure of catching his soul as it escaped and transferring it to a suitable successor; and, in the second place, by putting him to death before his natural force was abated, they would secure that the world should not fall into decay with the decay of the man-god. Every purpose, therefore, was answered, and all dangers averted by thus killing the man-god and transferring his soul, while yet at its prime, to a vigorous successor." Nowadays, we should not lay such complacent stress on the argument for belief in efficient causation of this kind: but it is not unlikely that as an act of expressive ritual the killing of the reth held some such metonymical significance. In Hocart's (1936, p. 54) definition of ritual, "If you cannot act on A by acting on B there can be no ritual" - whether the ritual itself be an expressive physical act or the use of verbal analogy. Thus, the killing of the reth or of Dinka fishing-spear masters was regarded with self-righteous horror by early European commentators: but savagery is in the mind of the beholder. The performance of corrective surgery - clothing Nyiking in a new human form, as we might objectivize it - here assumes the force of equivalence qua analogy in the Kantian definition quoted by Needham (1970): "Analogy... does not mean... an imperfect similarity of two things, but a perfect similarity of relations between quite dissimilar things." Frazer was at least right to discern a close correlation between the condition of all the many divine kings he excavated from his bookshelves and that of the societies over which they were alleged to have ruled.

It is surprisingly relevant at this point to consider the beliefs which attached to imperial power in the Byzantine Empire. The Emperor was not, of course, equivalent to God: he was the divinely sanctioned leader on earth. Ensslin (1948, pp. 272-3) comments: "So Constantine Porphyrogenitus saw in the rhythm and order of the imperial power a reflection of the harmony and order displayed by the Creator of the world... A necessary condition for succession to the throne was membership not only of the Empire but also of the orthodox Church, as well as the full possession of bodily and mental powers" (my emphasis). It is, of course, natural for a people to expect their temporal ruler to begin his reign in reasonably good health; but there were Roman Emperors, for instance, whose outward disabilities (such as those of Claudius) did not in the event debar them from assuming the purple toga. In Byzantium, the imperial personage was the symbol of his entire flock; and in his downfall through revolution his erstwhile subjects could read the marks of divine disfavour. This being so, there is no flaw in the logic (in Hocart's sense of "the logic of ritual") of the Emperor's accession through the choice of God and the choice of the people simultaneously. Vox populi, vox Dei: the people expressed through the analogy of their choice of ruler the condition

in which they hoped to find themselves.

This digression into mediaeval European history has a special kind of interest here. Above all, it is instructive to note in a highly organized state the same sort of metonymic reasoning as we have encountered in a relatively "cold" Nilotic society. Although the Byzantine Emperor was only nominally invested with religious power, his relationship with the ecclesiastical hierarchy must have been not unlike that of kings in ancient India: the separation of ritual and temporal functions in no way deprived the king of temporal leadership in a cosmologically ordained ordo rerum. There was, as Dumont tells us (1962), no actual struggle between the king and the Brahmans for spiritual leadership - the kind of rivalry which Nordholt reports for the Timorese Atoni (Nordholt: 1971) seems to have had more to do with the acquisition of temporal authority; and if the Byzantine clergy struggled at all with the kingship, it was to reinforce, not to destroy, its ritual foundations. The king of Byzantium could not be ritually killed within the framework of Christian ideology; but his death could be validated by hindsight as a divinely ordered regeneration of the society for whom he occupied the throne.

The "reign" of a reth, however, could only terminate (in theory, at least) in his execution. In a sense his people reigned over him rather than the other way round, and his state perpetuated itself in the condition to which the earlier Roman empire periodically returned: Mommsen wrote, "the consummation of the sovereignty of the people is at the same time its self-destruction". The welfare of the people resides symbolically in the person of the reth, and only the constant re-assertion of the whole society's sovereignty can avert decay. But it will be objected, and rightly; that the killing of the reth was a cyclical event, invariably triggered by signs of regal infirmity, whereas a strong Roman princeps could expect not only to retain his imperium up to the natural end of his life, but also ensure the succession of a favoured or adopted son as well as his own posterity as a personally recognized divinity - not submerged in the collective anonymity of Nyikang, but projected as in Vespasian's justly famous deathbed quip: "Methinks I am becoming a god!" Vespasian's irreverence showed a realistic confidence in his own posterity, and perhaps also in the succession of his son Titus. Divinity was invested in the Shilluk reth as the embodiment of Nyikang, from the moment of his investiture; whereas there were few Roman Emperors who were popularly regarded as divine during their own lifetimes.

Shilluk kingship can thus be conceptualized as a "mechanical" model: it was repetitive and evidently resistant to change. The Roman Emperor, by contrast, was elevated to a position of temporal power and was thenceforth committed to a struggle against the entropic forces of popular rebellion which could (and ultimately did) lead to the creation of anarchic chaos through the increasing disparity between the Emperor and the opposing masses which made and unmade him at ever shortening intervals. We must here clarify Balandier's (1970) use of the notion of entropy so as to distinguish more clearly between the mechanical notion of equilibrium (the balancing weight in the grandfather clock) and the specific opposition to personal power generated by a historically developing conflict between competing political forces.

Balandier's approach calls for examination here especially as it has some direct bearing on the symbolism of divine kingship. He writes: "In the ancient kingdom of Kongo, the initiation procedure known as Kimpassi... operates at times when the community is weakened or threatened... Society rediscovers its earlier vigour by re-enacting its own genesis. It assures its own rebirth by bringing to birth, according to its own norms, the young man fashioned by initiation" (p. 111). In the first place, this statement reifies society to the unacceptable extent of making it collectively objectify the analogy inherent in a set of rites de passage: ethnographical support for this contention is not given. Balandier is concerned to show how society uses ritual to replace the force expended in the continual struggle against entropy. Since, however, rituals of this kind are themselves cyclical - they may not occur at calendrically equidistant intervals, but they mark divisions of what Evans-Pritchard has called "structural time" - the search for renewal is generated by forces inherent in, and not extrinsic to, the society. In such a context the notion of entropy is at best of doubtful relevance.

Thus, too, the creation of a new reth and the killing of his predecessor are not to be regarded as manifestations of "heat" or "energy". If there are cases of interference with the regular procedure, these may be regarded as incipient traces of energy generated by the gradual development of a sense of social differentiation: man usually realises the impracticability (if not always the mechanical impossibility) of a social perpetuum mobile. That would mean a totally friction-free society!

Let us now return to the metonymical character of the divine king, and take up Evans-Pritchard's insight: "It is the kingship and not the king who is divine." This remark underlines the distinction just made, between the divinity of Vespasian qua Vespasian and the divinity of a Shilluk king qua occupier of his position. In a "hot" society the individual monarch plays a dynamic and active part in restructuring the relationship he has with his subjects according to the specific exigencies of the moment; the "divine king", by contrast, occupies a passive position in a repetitive process which for him ends with his execution. We cannot but agree with Evans-Pritchard's sceptical reaction to reports, published by Seligman and others, of the "absolute power" of the Shilluk king.

Gluckman's distinction between rebellion and revolution (1956, pp. 125-6) is foreshadowed - in the paradigmatic dimension, it should be noted - in Evans-Pritchard's essay: Shilluk rebellions "were not revolutions but rebellions against the king in the name of the kingship." It is interesting that the Shilluk apparently gave up ritual regicide long before the Dinka, whose masters of the fishing-spear are less exclusive and dominant figures. By the time Evans-Pritchard conducted his investigations, it would appear, the friction between a reth desirous of life and power and other contenders for the same office had begun to generate a little "heat", though further developments were precluded by European domination.

The Nyoro kingship provides an interesting contrast to the cases so far discussed. The Mukama must not come into contact with death, and Nyoro believe that in the past a king who was afflicted with physical weakness would ideally bring about his own death. Beattie seems to follow Evans-Pritchard when he writes: "We do not know for sure whether any kings were killed in this way, but the important thing is that it

is thought that they were. This shows us how Nyoro traditionally thought about their country and their kingship" (Beattie 1960, p. 26). But does it, when the historical facts are so uncertain? In any case, it is now clear that different kinds of authority were at stake in Bunyoro (Needham 1967), and the differentiation between these, as we shall see, is of paramount importance. In fact, a line of historical development is not outside the bounds of reasonable conjecture, and is suggested by the fact that Dinka masters of the fishing-spear are on record as having died at the hands of their "subjects" far more recently than any Nyoro Mukama can have done. But the phrase "how Nyoro traditionally thought" reduces us to a level of generalization, a kind of gnomic synchrony, in which the processes of political change become quite indistinguishable.

In this connection it is instructive to look at the mythology of divine kingship as it appears in these three cultures, Dinka, Shilluk and Nyoro. Here are three myths thus connected, sharing a common thematic structure but exhibiting variation over significant points for our study of the different evaluations of divine kingship. The common feature of all these stories is the crossing of a river, made possible by some form of supernatural intervention. In all three, moreover, the origins of the divine kingship are hinted at. But the differences are also very striking, the more so in view of the common matrix. It is not my intention here to attempt a full structural comparison of these myths in all their major aspects, but simply to demonstrate that the textual variation is in a correlative relationship to the local differences in political authority, and to show how this may help us to understand more clearly the nature of "divine kingship".

To facilitate discussion, we now present the three myths.

1. Dinka (Lienhardt 1961, pp. 173-5).

"Aiwel Longar then left the people; and Divinity placed mountains and rivers between him and them. And across one river which the people had to cross, Divinity made a dike like a fence. As the people tried to pass this fence of reeds to cross to the other side, Longar stood above them on the opposite bank of the river, and as soon as he saw the reeds moved as men touched them, he darted his fishing-spear at them and struck them in the head, thus killing them as they crossed.

"The people were thus being finished altogether, and a man named Agothyathik called the people together... His plan was that his friend should take the sacrum of an ox which he had fastened to a long pole, and should move through the water before him, holding out the sacral bone so that it would move the reeds. They carried out this plan, and Longar's fishing-spear, darted at the sacrum which he mistook for a human head, was held fast there." This gave Agothyathik a chance to engage Longar in wrestling and tire him out, whereupon Longar gave various things to men who were to be the founders of spear-master clans, and created warrior clans.

"When Aiwel Longar had given out his powers with the spears, he told Agothyathik and the other masters of the fishing-spear to look after the country, saying that he himself would leave it to them to do so" except in the event of their needing him in times of serious trouble.

2. Shilluk (Crazzolara 1950, pp. 40-41)

"... the river was blocked by a grass barrier. They had to leave and wanted to make use of the river also, which however was obstructed. A man from the suite of Nyikaango came forth and suggested to him how a way in the river could be opened... He, Oboogo said, would descend into the river up to his neck, indicating the place convenient for cutting, and Nyikaango should descend after him and cut, from under the arm of Oboogo, the grass cover and, at the same time, make an incision into his armpit. The running blood and the grass-cutting would divide the barrier, thus leaving a way for the canoes of the Shilluk. This was done and the water-way was cleared. The wound was insignificant... (Oboogo) established his fame for ever in his country..."

3. Nyoro (Fisher n.d., pp. 112-4)

"The warriors went before... to seek the kingdom of Bunyoro, and to found a dynasty of kings that should reign over it to the present day..."

"So the people then knew that their master was going to settle in a new land; and they were afraid... (The witch-doctor) Nyakoko... (told) them that... with a leader like Mpuga and a priest like himself they had nothing to fear."

"So in the morning they continued their journey, and at mid-day reached the River Nile. The usual ferry was not there, and after waiting till evening and it failed to appear, Mpuga and his people greatly feared, for they imagined that this misfortune portended evil to their enterprise. Nyakoko then commanded a little girl to be brought... (and) laid his wand on the face of the river and the waters separated into two, leaving a dry path in the midst. The little girl was placed in the middle of the river-bed, then Nyakoko caused the waters to unite again, and they immediately swallowed up the child..."

"Instantly the boat appeared..."

(A similar story follows, in which Mpuga himself performs the sacrifice. They eventually reach Bunyoro and Mpuga becomes king, with Nyakoko as his High Priest.)

The major differences between these myths would appear to shed much light on our stated line of enquiry. In the Shilluk and Nyoro versions, the ancestor of the kings is assisted by a friend to produce the desired crossing by an appeal to divine aid; whereas the Dinka myth attributes the beginnings of the clans of the masters of the fishing-spear to the success of an ancestor and his friend in overcoming a semi-divine adversary who is personalized. The Shilluk and Nyoro stories both require a measure of sacrifice, whereas the Dinka story seems to portray the control of life-forces, personified by Aiwel Longar, as being taken over by the spear-masters' ancestors through the use of physical coercion. Aiwel Longar thus represents the objective of ritual, the control of the dangerous forces of life and death. But, as Lienhardt points out, Longar is himself a prototypical spear-master. Moreover, Dinka commoners regard it as highly prestigious to marry into a spear-masters' clan, and Lienhardt sees a reflection of this in the myth. This concern with life reminds us of Hocart's wise pronouncement: "It is not government that man wants, but life."

The heroes of the Shilluk and Nyoro stories, then, make their appeal to unseen powers. The significance of this would seem to lie in a difference in the relationship between the various "kings" and their divine models. Among the Dinka, ritual authority is not concentrated in the hands of one leader, and the existence of many equal colleagues is validated by the way in which Longar distributes his spears and concomitant power so widely. In the Nyoro myth the hero, Mpuga, is merely instructed by a ritual specialist and subsequently demonstrates his ability to communicate with the divine powers according to Nyakoko's example. His power is not shared, and it is passed down intact from generation to generation. There is no Nyoro or Shilluk story of a prototypical "divine king" sharing his powers among several appointed successors, in the manner of Aiwel Longar.

The emergence of a dominant politico-military figure seems to be accompanied by a specialisation of the role of ritual leader in the person of a priest; or, in other words, the separation of the one from the many is accompanied by a separation of the ritual from the political function. Already in the Dinka myth we encounter the origins of a division between war-masters and masters of the fishing-spear. In the Nyoro myth, by contrast, the High Priest is a single man - still the faithful friend we meet in the other stories, and still in remarkable possession of a store of esoteric knowledge, but here finally given the specific position of chief ritual specialist in preference to the king himself. Formally, and especially in view of the dualistic symbolism in both areas, we may not unreasonably compare the Nyoro situation with the similar separation of the ritual and political spheres in Asia, cosmologically and pragmatically (Dumézil 1948; Coomaraswamy 1942; Needham 1962; Needham 1967; Nordholt 1971). But for an essentially historical view, we have to turn to the mythologies of a more or less culturally homogeneous area, as we have done here. That is the way "structural history" can seek empirical validation.

We have noted that among the Dinka there is a separation of ritual and military functions, which are vested in the spear-master and the warrior clans respectively. Lienhardt (1961, p. 145) writes: "There is one possible exception to the statement that only spear-master clans have Flesh as a divinity; it is sometimes claimed by members of the clan Padiangbar, a warrior clan. Where the Padiangbar clan is represented in any force, it is my experience that its members regard themselves as having spiritual equality with masters of the fishing-spear." It is interesting to note that in this society spiritual authority can be claimed by a high-ranking clan which has numerical strength: one is reminded of the numerical aspect of dominance in the Indian caste system; and the analogy suggests that the spiritual power of the Dinka masters of the fishing-spear is seen as more than a mere formality, that indeed it is the kind of authority that must be obtained before a progression to autocratic rule becomes possible. Fustel de Coulanges early stressed the sacerdotal origins of kingship in the ancient Mediterranean: "Religion created the king in the city, as it had made the family chief in the house" (n.d., p. 178); and Ensslin (1948, p. 269) shows how even after Christianity had made the divinity of the Emperor an unacceptable notion, yet: "Resistance to the will of the sovereign was a crime against something inviolably sacred: it was a sacrilege." In Republican Rome, as Fustel de Coulanges reminds us, kingship was not so much odious as sacred: Suetonius talks of the sanctitas regum (Julius Caesar, 6; Fustel de Coulanges n.d., p. 179).

Here let us return for a moment to our three myths. It will be recalled that the common element which stands out above all others is the notion of passage: in passage, in a state of marginality, the society in each case is exposed to danger. In the Dinka myth, this danger, personified in Aiwel Longar, is brought under control; but, according to the age-old paradox that the conqueror becomes the conquered, the ability to give life and to take it away is now vested in the spear-master clans. In the Shilluk and Nyoro versions, however, the spiritual power of the leader does not derive from his risking his own life to wrest it from some semi-divine source: he sheds blood, not his own, in order to gain life for the rest of his people, and it is in his ability to do this that the successful negotiation of passage lies.

Mary Douglas suggests "that those holding office in the explicit part of the structure tend to be credited with consciously controlled powers, in contrast with those whose role is less explicit and who tend to be credited with unconscious, uncontrollable powers, menacing those in better defined positions" (1966, p. 123). But this formulation leads logically to the further conclusion that even where power is controlled it may yet be dangerous. The Dinka spear-masters' ancestor wrested control of power from Aiwel Longar, but it is still a dangerous thing that they control. Compare also the two-edged quality of Nyoro mahano. The separation of priestly and warrior functions among the Dinka moreover, shows that when it comes to military affairs the masters of the fishing-spear are interstitial: they remain at home when war breaks out. This accords well with Douglas' observation that "it is a common feature of competitive segmentary political systems that the leaders of the aligned forces enjoy less credit for spiritual power than certain persons in the interstices of political alignment" (1966, p. 132). The division of power follows a division of kinds of political interest.

If, however, the divine king controls the dangerous powers of life and death, his own decay, if not violently forestalled, spells disaster for the community. For in him, in a very real sense, man and god are conjoined, fused, identified. Only to the limited extent that he is separated from his people is divinity separated from them. But as he draws away from his people and rises higher and higher in the temporal sphere, he cuts himself away more and more from divinity. This externalization is paralleled by the increasing specialization of the priesthood. For now the king is not divine; he rules by a right conferred from above, not from within. As he draws away from his erstwhile godhead, he has an increasing need of intermediaries to sanctify his claims to temporal authority. He has sacrificed his own puissance and strives to increase his pouvoir. And the latter is dependent upon his ability to keep the entropic hordes of rebellion at bay.

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