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Kings and Gods as Ecological Agents:

Reciprocity and Unilateralism in the Management of Natural Order

Simon Simonse

Pax Christi Netherlands

1. Introduction

The questions to which my paper aims to contribute is: do non-western societies have a qualitatively better, a more balanced relationship with nature than modern western societies and why? Can the difference between the two be described in terms of an opposition between a predominantly reciprocal and an fundamentally exploitative relationship? What difference does the Judeo-Christian tradition make in shaping the modern relationship.

To answer these questions I will give brief descriptions of the way three cultural traditions have structured the relationship between man and nature: societies that are ruled by sacred kings, societies where power over nature is attributed to divinities, and the Old Testament tradition. As case of sacred kinship I present ethnographic material is taken from my anthropological fieldwork among the Lulubo, Lokoya and Lotuho peoples from the East Bank of the Nile in Southern Sudan. I will use the term 'Eastern Nilotic' as shorthand for this complex. For the societies where divinities play the central role, I take the Western Nilotic Dinka, Nuer, and Atuot living in the flood plains of the Nile north of the kingship societies.

In comparing these three traditions my point of departure is Rene Girard's analysis of culture as a mechanism to resolve conflict by directing the aggression of the members of society on a victim and so achieving a new consensus. We shall see that in the kingship societies what we call natural phenomena are an integral part in culturally staging the scapegoat mechanism. They are the stage of human rivalries and their resolution. Among the polytheistic Western Nilotes they are the instrument through which the gods make their power felt and ask attention from humans. In the Old Testament natural phenomena remain the domain of God's power. Man should not try to interfere. His mission is to combat human evil as defined in the Mosaic laws.

2. Kings as scapegoats and negotiators of natural disaster

The survival of the Lokoya and Lulubo communities of the East Bank of the Nile is dependent on forces that are unpredictable. As agriculturists they are dependent on regular rains. However, rains in their area are erratic and localised. As a result there is always a risk that the harvest may fail. The soil is of varying quality, giving varying yields in different places. The birth rate is another major concern. It determines the security of the community in its relationship to neighbouring, frequently hostile, communities. There is the concern for epidemics, crop-eating insects and birds, root-eating worms. Violent winds may destroy the crop. Wild animals, lions and leopards may kill humans and cattle. A concern of a different order is the effectiveness of spears and arrows in war and in defence.

When adversity affects the community, the first question asked by those affected is that of its cause. Frequently the cause is a breach of the social rules: an act of violence, the failure to perform or to properly perform a ritual of purification for the violence. It may also be an unconscious resentment on the part of a person or group that feels excluded from

benefits enjoyed by others. It may be the cry of a neglected relative. It may be an attack by outsiders.

Among the Lulubo and Lokoya, responsibility for the various aspects of the natural environment that can be critical for community survival is allocated to the different clans. In case of a crisis (drought, infertility) the clan associated with the problem, is the target of investigations. The main investigation strategy is to check, one by one, the quarrels members of that clan have been involved in. When such a conflict has been identified, a solution is suggested: by way of reconciliation or restitution. Of particular interest are provocations of the responsible clan official. If a settlement of the dispute fails to bring the required result, there will be more rounds of investigation. If no solution is found the official of the clan associated with the disorder will be suspected of deliberately sabotaging the community. Accusations and counter-accusations will be thrown back and forth. The clan-official stands face-to-face with the community. If the disaster subsides, and if he uses the expectations focussed on him cleverly, he may come out as a more powerful and wealthier member of the community. If the disaster prolongs, and there are no other candidates left to be blamed, he must be killed. He ends up as the scapegoat of his community.

This type of drama is most elaborate in the case of the Rainmaker. Of the various public concerns the weather has the greatest dramatic potential. Rains are capricious and localised. Rain falls over a period of 9 months. Its timeliness is a precondition for the two main harvests. The tension is particularly high in June when the first crop is about to be harvested and the annual period of hunger is peaking. The power of Rainmakers is built on this suspense. If they manage the rains well they gain in prestige. If the rains fail the community turns against its Rainmaker blaming him or her of drought. For as long as the drought persists, the confrontation between the king and his community will escalate. The process follows the steps listed in the attached table. It may ultimately lead to the Rainmaker being killed. In the area I studied I identified 26 cases of accomplished killings of kings within living memory. As the crisis deepens and the need for a solution rises all members of the community, including women and children, are gradually drawn into the process. It is the most dramatic manifestation of the community acting as a unified entity.

Crises are not desirable. People value predictability and normality. Social ecological responsibility is embedded in relations of exchange between the community and the designated clans or its officials. The clan-leaders, Rainmakers, the Master of the Bush, Master of the Soil, the Master of Birds etc. are given recognition by being given designated parts of game after a hunt, the first catch of white ants, etc. They may be reminded of their responsibility by an annual sacrifice at the beginning of the season. Clan-officials are also called on on a private basis: to bless a newly cleared field, heal barrenness, to protect against pests.

Reciprocity in the management of natural order may be negative as well as positive. If the members of the community provoke the clan official, disorder will follow: leopards may turn up at unusual places, the soil will turn infertile, and women have miscarriages. Initial solutions for addressing such disorder are through mechanisms of exchange, by way of restitution and restoration.

Between the different ecological responsibilities, rain is the most important. The importance not only depends on its practical importance for agriculture but also on its potential for generating social consensus during a period of crisis. While the Rainmaker usually shares the title of 'King' (Lulubo '*osi*', Lokoya, '*ohobu*' Lotuho '*hobu*') with two or three other officials (usually fertility and soil) their cosmological position as 'kings of heaven' is matched by the highest social status.

In conclusion of this section I note (a) that the relationship with the environment is embedded in relations of exchange that are governed by the principle of reciprocity. However

the reciprocity is not between the community and the environment but between different clans using their ecological powers to blackmail others and create dependency. (b) In the Eastern Nilotic vision ecological order is not a separate domain. The world, human relations and natural events are interpreted as a single totality. Natural and social events are intrinsically connected. Disturbances in nature are explained by social upheavals, social conflict and consensus are bound to impact on the weather, on the behaviour of predators, on the fertility of the soil, etc. (c). Nature, as a domain separated from human rivalries and attempts to resolve these, carries limited interest. In the late 1960s as a result of insecurity and proliferation of firearms the large mammals in the area got depleted. People remember when they killed and ate their last rhino, when the last elephant was spotted etc. Yet these memories are not connected with any particular accusations or ruminations about the balance with nature having being disturbed.

3. Divinity as an ecological agent

In few ethnographic areas is the continuity between kingship and divinity, captured in Rene Girard's famous phrase that "gods are dead kings as much as sacred kings are gods who have not yet died", so easily visible as in the Nilotic world. The death of the Eastern Nilotic Rainmaker/King plays a key role. If he dies as a victim of the crowd, his death is expected to release the rain and to re-activate ecological normality. If the King dies a non-violent death his powers will remain active for at least one complete season. For that period the tomb will be the object of ritual attention. For about one year after his death the King will not be succeeded. The dead King reigns. Before the new rainy season, after the tomb has been flattened, a new person will take over. We could say that these kings enjoy a short-lived divinity. The power of the king and that of divinity are continuous. The same terms are used for both. To say that a certain rainmaker's powers are effective the Lulubo will say: the man is really 'juok'. "Juok" is the word used for God. The peoples practising sacred kingship do not have elaborate ideas about god. He is recognised as the supreme power and as such as the ultimate cause of disaster. Addressing these manifestations of God's power, the Lotuho practice a ritual in which God as the ultimate Destroyer is chased away from the community. The lack of any elaboration of theology is remarkable, especially when compared with the precise cosmology of which the king is the object. Early travellers were amazed to find 'atheists' in the heart of Africa.

As an interpretation of the scapegoat mechanism the kingship model is simple and straightforward. The layers of mystification and misrepresentation seem to be less and/or thinner than in religious systems. The sacred kingship mechanism may therefore offer important clues to the explanation of other religious systems. We should realise that the need for transformation of the sacred kingship system has an objective basis. Sacred kinship, especially the variety involving the killing of the king, is a vulnerable political system. Regicide easily triggers revenge, and may so defeat its own purpose. The king himself, for the sake of his own survival, has an interest in changing the system. In this respect the following strategies of transformation can be distinguished: ritualisation of the office, centralisation and concentration of royal powers and the divinisation of the power of the king..

Ritualisation is very prominent in most West African and Bantu kingship systems. The king's rule is set a fixed period of time. He is surrounded by different echelons of dignitaries and removed from direct interaction with his people. The violence of the scapegoating is replaced by a sequence of acts in which the violence is reduced or controlled. Sacrifice replaces lynching; a smaller animal is killed to take the place of a bigger bloodier one, an egg or fruit is crushed to replace an animal. Control of manifest violence is also achieved by selecting officiants in hierarchical order, by making attendance a privilege to a closed circle, or screening it off completely, by setting and keeping a fixed time. The table shows the buffer

role that ritual plays. in channelling discontent, containing the escalation and in temporising the scapegoating of the agent deemed responsible for collective misfortune.

The dimension of ritual that is particularly differentiated in Nilotic religions is that of the role of the animal victim in sacrifice. Cattle and other livestock are classified according to their colour configuration. Different issues and different powers need animals of matching colour configuration. Rain needs a fully black victim. Killing a red animal would be counterproductive, a curse. Cattle are the substitutes of men. They are intimately associated to man. Each young man acquires his praise ox who becomes part of his identity. Cattle are only killed in sacrifice. The herds of cattle kept by the Nuer and the Dinka represent a huge sacrificial capital to cope with adversity. Different social categories are defined by the part of the sacrificial animal to which they are entitled. To external hostile forces the oxen offer a powerful protective shield. Internally they define an orderly social map.

An obvious strategy to reduce the vulnerability of sacred kingship is by concentrating the powers over different natural domains in the hands of one king. Likewise powers over a single domain dispersed over several actors may be centralised in the hands of a single person. In the Eastern Nilotic communities, both processes were at work. Dispersed and centralist political systems form a continuum and exist side by side. Next to the village societies^[1] of the Lulubo and Lokoya, each with a rich differentiation of powers relating to different ecological domains, allocated to different clans, we find the kingdoms of the Lotuho where one king may have as many as 15 large village communities under his care. The same king may have acquired responsibility for other natural domains, relegating other clans to a position of secondary importance.

Turning the focus of community expectations from the live king to an immortal and invisible extension or substitute of the king, a *divinity*, is a radical strategy of pre-empting the violence connected with sacred kingship. From the perspective of the societies practising kingship it is an obvious strategy since the deceased king is already object of veneration for some time after his death.

In the Western Nilotic communities to the north of the flood plains, among the Nuer, the Dinka and the Atuot, divinities occupy the centre-stage when it comes to protection against natural dangers and disasters. Some of the spiritual agents are linked to clans, as among their Eastern Nilotic counterparts, others are 'free'. The free divinities even cross ethnic borders.. Divinities of the Dinka or Nuer are classified as belonging to the Upper World or Heaven or to the Earth, as the powers of the kings and clan-masters among the Eastern Nilotics. The free divinities impact on particular realms of human experience and may provide protection against dangers and disasters. Among the Dinka Deng is the god of rain. Macardit is associated with fertility and infertility in humans and cattle. Garang, a divinity whose cult spread in the 50s has power over rain and may manifest himself in fevers and minor indispositions. Abuk is a female deity with a responsibility for the grain-harvest. These divinities also manifest themselves by possessing individuals. These then become their mediums who may effectively pray and sacrifice for the blessing or protection desired. These divinities are believed to be related to one another as father and son, husband and wife.

The Dinka clan divinities, unlike the powers associated to the Lulubo and Lokoya clans, are of little practical relevance to the members of other clans. These divinities -who Lienhardt later preferred to call totems- are mostly associated with animals and plants. Acts that may imply violence to the totem-animal (hunting, eating) must be avoided at all costs as it may cause blindness and other misfortunes.

One clan divinity is of relevance to all: Ring ('flesh') the divinity of the clan of the Masters of the Fishing Spear, responsible for peacemaking, human fertility and sacrifice. The name of the divinity refers to the quivering flesh of an animal dying in sacrifice. When

present at a sacrifice Spearmasters will quiver like the animals killed.. Spearmasters do not take part in fights and should avoid the sight of blood. They are the guardians of truth.

The Nuer share some of their divinities with the Dinka. Deng sends and protects against diseases. Diu is associated with the cattle plague. Buk (the same as Dinka Abuk), the mother of Deng, has power over streams and sickness and receives first harvest offerings. Dayim, Dhol, sons of Deng, and Wiu are war gods invoked to destroy the enemies. Wiu also manifests himself in thunder.^[2]

The Shilluk, neighbours of both Dinka and Nuer, have a mixed regime. They have a sacred king and divinities. The divinities are the ancestors that have preceded the ruling king. Each of them has a sanctuary to which ecological power is attributed. The Shilluk no longer go to the point of killing their kings in times of crisis. Instead their kings, when they grow old and weak, are expected to give a signal that they should be suffocated.

When the responsibility for disaster and communal well-being is attributed to divine beings procedures to turn or control the course of disaster become less direct. The relation of reciprocity in which environmental concerns were embedded in the model of sacred kingship is now askew. There is still the possibility of pleading and negotiating with the various divinities, through prayer and through sacrifice, however the possibility of putting real pressure is gone. The suspense that follows prayer or sacrifice, is less charged than that triggered by regicide or the threat to kill the king.. Divinities are freer in their response to popular pressure than the sacred king. In the ethnographic literature on the Dinka and Nuer. I have not come across records of open expressions of anger towards god as among the Eastern Nilotes. But anger is the predominant mood by which divinity makes itself known to people.

The transformation that takes place when the role of kings is taken over by gods, is a process with at least three dimensions:

(a) the responsibility for the resolution of social and ecological crises is transferred to beings external to the community, with whom direct negotiations are not possible, and on whom direct physical pressure by the community is excluded; the relationship is definitively mediated;

(b) the relationship between the agent controlling the ecology and the community has become irreversible. In the kingship scenario victimhood alternated between the community (suffering disaster) and the king (suffering regicide). In the divinity scenario man is always at the receiving end of victimhood. Among the e Western Nilotes, as in many other places, religiosity is, first of all, submissiveness to God and acceptance of victimhood. The relationship is unilateral.

(c) in the representation of the transformation the representation of the externalisation of divine powers from the human realm is reversed. The divine is not represented as derived from the human sphere. It is the divine which is represented as the original totality from which man because of his carelessness, greed or other weaknesses, is expelled. Divinity is the expelling agent and man the victim of expulsion. He is not only excluded from the communion with God but also from immortality and the enjoyment of the abundance of nature. Since his expulsion man seeks the nearness of God. In their hymns addressed to God, the Dinka emphasise this sense of having been abandoned in a world full of misery and confusion. Lienhardt, one of the principal ethnographers of the Dinka, quotes the following hymn:

‘ I have been left in misery indeed
God, help me,
Will you refuse to help the ants of this country
While we have the clan-divinity Deng
our home is called ‘Lies and Confusion’

What is all this for, O God
Alas, I am your child' (Lienhardt, 1961:45)

Once ecological responsibility has been defined as the domain of divine sovereignty, man loses the initiative in maintaining ecological order. He becomes a mere beneficiary or victim of a divine master plan or, as the case may be, of divine arbitrariness. The main strategies left to him are crying out for mercy and giving due attention to God through sacrifices and offerings in the hope to receive protection. The Nilotic divinities are jealous for attention. Neglecting them can cause serious harm to the community. In the ethnographic literature on the Dinka and the Nuer I have not come across ritual in which divinity is chased away by the community as among the Eastern Nilotes.

When we compare the Eastern Nilotes who practise kingship with the Western Nilotes practising god-worship, we notice a shift in the nature of the phenomena in which power manifests itself. In kingship-societies the king and clan-officials are primarily concerned with the relationship between man and environment. Rain, fertility, protection against pests and enemies are the issues. While these concerns remain a concern of divinity, the emphasis shifts to human health. Nuer and Dinka gods ask attention by making people sick, physically or mentally..

The tendency towards centralisation and concentration that we observed in kingship, also operates on the level of divinity. The most important gods are no longer linked to a clan. The free divinities of the Nuer and Dinka attack human beings indiscriminately, irrespective of clan-affiliation. New divinities appear and have an interethnic appeal. The Nuer go further in this respect than the Dinka. They make their gods more dependent on the supreme god ('kwoth'). Using kinship idiom a hierarchy is established in relations between the various heavenly divinities (Garang, Buk, Deng) who are defined as God's children. On the other hand the Nuer de-emphasise the divinities of the earth, especially if these manifest themselves as reptiles as is often the case among the Dinka. Evans-Pritchard emphasises this monotheism of the Nuer. *Kwoth* is believed to be omnipotent. On the one hand he cannot be negotiated with and therefore has no sanctuary, on the other hand he is believed to maintain a special relationship with the Nuer. Unlike the supreme divinities in other African religions he is believed to take the side of the Nuer. He offers them protection and destroys their enemies. He is partial like the God of the Old Testament.

4. Messianism: the historicisation of resolution of mimetic crisis

How is the interaction between God, man and environment structured in the great historical faiths? Again, here, the scapegoat paradigm is an indispensable instrument in making religious strategies that are far apart comparable. I limit myself to the Old Testament religion. The following parallels between the Nilotic gods and the God of the Old Testament are obvious the Nilotic traditions discussed in the previous paragraphs and the religion of the Old Testament;

(a) We are dealing with a divinity who unilaterally controls the relationship between man and his environment. Disaster, natural disorder come from Him, frequently in response to misbehaviour of man, the flood for example.

(b) As in the Nilotic myth man is defined as the victim of an act of expulsion by God. The reasons given for the expulsion in the Bible are not fundamentally different from those in Nilotic myths Both put the blame on man. A secondary blame is put on animal agents (the snake in the Genesis story; a hyena cuts the connection between heaven and earth). Communion with God, abundance and immortality are lost.

(c) In facing disaster, disease, defeat and misfortune man is dependent on God. Although these may be a punishment of God for specific acts of misbehaviour, God cannot be pressurised by acts of sacrifice. There is no bargaining for support against enemies. When God answers the call for protection He does so in full sovereignty. The most poignant expression of the relationship between man and God are the Psalms in which man affirms his victimhood in the face of the Almighty.

(d) A new element that we saw prefigured in the way the Nuer define the relationship between god and man, is the confirmation of the partnership between God and his people in an explicit covenant. God is partial to this community, gives it guarantees that it will be fertile, supports it in its struggle with its enemies. In the covenant man is put under an obligation not to worship rival divinities and respect the code of behaviour set by God..

Is the Bible story just a particularly strong variant of the centralist, divinising, tendency that we already noticed among the Nilotes? Or is there more? To be able to define the specificity of the Biblical approach we return to the fundamental religious scenario as outlined in the early works of Rene Girard.. There religion is defined as asset of practices and beliefs that allows communities to resolve mimetic crisis. To end the rivalry that disables social life, the members of the community designate one of its members as the cause of the crisis. Peace, normality and consensus are regained when this agent is expelled. The unanimity against the victim of expulsion makes it possible for the community to overcome its differences and make a new start. The expelled agent may retrospectively be thanked and venerated by his persecutors because he stood at the beginning of a new order..

The process has three structural dimensions:

- a time frame: there is development from a situation of chaotic conflict to a situation of peace and order
- a spatial dimension: the boundary between inside and outside that is crossed by the expelled victim
- a dimension of value: the situation of violent conflict is undesirable or evil while the result of the expulsion process is highly desirable, good.

We have demonstrated that this scheme fits the societies practising regicide very well. Disorders in the relationship with the environment are blamed on the king, who is ultimately expelled from the community in a process marked by a gradual increase in suspense. This suspense unites the members of the community in a situation of enhanced potential for conflict and heightened stress. The crisis is solved when environmental normality, the rain, returns. The scheme also fits the societies worshipping gods. Here the divine agent causing disaster and misfortune must first be identified. The evil may be transferred to a sacrificial victim, usually an animal killed as an offering to the god. In response the blessings of the respective deity, social and environmental order are expected to return.

In the kingship as well as in the god-worship scenario the process of identifying the cause of disaster often involves a search of heart of the community. In this process of moral purification members of the community are reminded to scorn violence, forgive on another, and start with a clean slate. These processes are relatively short term and recurrent. When the old crisis has been solved after some months or years, new problems that need resolution are bound to present themselves. The building and maintenance of order has a cyclical character. The work of converting order out of violence is never finished.

The novelty of the Old Testament is in the definition of the time frame of the crisis. The suffering of the people, with which God has a covenant, is put in a historical frame.. History itself is a crisis from which salvation is possible. The history of the people with which God has a partnership is a long process of purification in response to recurrent crises. The

purification is no longer primarily in terms of sacrificial elimination of evil, but in moral terms. What is good and what is bad, are defined in the law given by God to his people. The resolution of crises by designating an arbitrary scapegoat is condemned. Sacrificing of humans is condemned. The sacrificing of animals is restricted to calendrical rituals and subjected to strict rules laid down by the priests. Sacrifices in function of occurring events are discouraged. History is no longer, just a succession of religious and political regimes but a process with a purpose in which periods of moral progress follow periods of decline.

Religious action is increasingly focussed on moral purification, a purification of hearts in accordance with the law that is given as contract of the covenant. This law addresses human violence directly, in their day to day behaviour at all times, and not only in the context of disaster or misfortune. Ecological well being and moral well being are strictly separated. Periods of abundance can be periods of moral decline and injustice, while justice and morality may flourish in adversity. This is the typical message of the prophets. They harangue the people in God's name. They also keep the time. The resolution of the crisis must have an end. They remind the people of the time frame that really counts. This resolution of the crisis is called 'the kingdom of God'. In this kingdom the separation of God and man, the many conflicts between men, as well as the hostility between man and nature and the hostility in nature itself (reconciliation of the lion and the lamb). will be resolved.

While the resolution of a social or ecological crisis can be empirically verified by the end of hostilities, the falling of rain, the reconciliation of former enemies, the resolution of a moral crisis can only be proclaimed. The role of the prophets is to preserve the sense of the encompassing time frame, and awaken people to the fact that the time is limited. Without the suspense of an imminent end of the crisis, the scenario of historical salvation is incomplete and in danger of collapsing. Prophets therefore announce 'the end of time', 'the kingdom of God', 'the last judgment' as imminent. It is significant that in the Old Testament the resolution of the conflict is represented in reference to kingship, as a social entity led by a person who has been 'anointed' as king, a 'messiah'. Messianism is the fundamental structure of the Abrahamic faiths, and of its modern secular derivatives.

Conclusions

1. In the ethnographic material I presented natural phenomena as the objects of transactions between the community and office-holders, including 'kings' who carry communal responsibility for a particular domain of nature. It would be wrong to characterise these transactions as occurring between the community and nature. They are rather a certain category of environmental risks to which the community is exposed. The presented cases may therefore carry few lessons for drawing up a 'natural contract' between the global community and its natural environment that could be the framework of new legislation and policies to manage the relationship to the mutual benefit of both.

2. Natural and social events are interpreted by the communities of the Upper Nile as a single drama in which social events are bound to have repercussions on natural order and human conflicts are the nexus of cosmological causality.

3. The relationships between office holders and the community is structured according to relations of reciprocity. The reciprocity is at times positive, at other times negative in character. It is positive when the blessings of the office holders generate gifts from the community, or when gifts of the community motivate the effectiveness of the office holder. Reciprocity turns negative when the community considers the office-holder ineffective or

unwilling to provide the community with the desired blessings. This negative reciprocity may escalate and result in death.

4. By attributing power over the domains of nature to divinities, instead of living kings, the negative reciprocity can no longer run its full cycle. While divinities have the power to harm living humans, humans cannot harm divinity. Cycles of positive reciprocity, often triggered by natural disaster and diseases, interpreted as divine demands for attentions, continue to structure the relationship between gods and men.

5. In the Old Testament the natural environment as a key concern in transactions between God and men further retreats to the background to give way to a concern about moral purity and justice. This maybe the context in which the creation story in Genesis must be read. The text emphatically repeats that what God created was good. No more need for man to play a sacrificial side-role in maintaining cosmic order. What is left is a secular responsibility for our environment.

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^[1]These are well fortified communities of between 1500 and 2500 inhabitants

^[2]When the powers bringing disaster and offering protection become divine the role of the living office holders changes. The Nuer are minimalists in giving a special role to their closest equivalents of the peace - and rainmakers or kings of the Eastern Nilotes. The Master of the Land, also known as leopard-skin chief is only distinguished by the form of his grave. His body is stretched out in an underground recess. The Dinka practice is more telling. They expect their Spearmaster to voluntarily indicate the day he wants to be buried alive. At his request the community digs a large hole. The Spearmaster is seated on a roofed bed praying singing hymns. The atmosphere surrounding the burial is one of euphoric aggressiveness. The animal that is killed at the occasion is

suffocated in a joint attack by the men of warrior age. These elements may be interpreted as a reminder of the anger surrounding the king about to be killed for causing drought.