

## FOREWORD TO KINGS OF DISASTER

*by Mark Anspach*

*Who is the king of this disaster?* That is the question the Lulubo ask whenever a calamity of some kind strikes the village. It could be an invasion of locusts, an outbreak of contagious disease, or a string of attacks on livestock by lions or leopards. Whatever the nature of the misfortune, people want to know who is responsible. The 'king' of the disaster is the individual who will be blamed for maliciously bringing harm to other members of the community. In short, the king is the scapegoat.

Drought is the greatest scourge that can afflict the mountainous region of southeastern Sudan studied by Simon Simonse in this pathbreaking work. Since the Rainmaker is thought to possess the power to cause or prevent drought, he is the most important king. Simonse draws on extensive field research and a wealth of archival sources to explore the pivotal role of the Rainmaker in the collective life of the Bari, Lotuho, Pari, Lokoya and Lulubo. This is the first detailed ethnographic portrait of these five Nilotic peoples and also the most systematic and successful attempt to apply the scapegoat theory of René Girard to an anthropological case study.

Girard traces sacred kingship and other ritual institutions to what he calls the scapegoat mechanism. In the face of a crop-destroying drought or other calamity over which people have no direct control, the existence of a scapegoat provides an irreplaceable focal point for collective action. When hunger threatens, tempers fray. An empty stomach will make people bitter and resentful even when no one is responsible. Directing their bitterness at the scapegoat may help keep them from jumping at each other's throat. The scapegoat mechanism defuses internal violence and promotes unity by channeling tension and hostility in a single direction. Although meteorological conditions may be left unchanged, an agreement to blame one person for bad weather might well stabilize the social climate.

Once a Rainmaker has been designated, everyone else can hold that person responsible for an uninterrupted dry spell. The Rainmaker's job is not just to make rain, but to absorb the community's pain when the rain fails and food grows scarce. At the installation ceremony for the Rainmaker of Ngangala, the people tell him, 'We give the bitterness in our stomach to you.' The Rainmaker is destined to bear the brunt of collective resentment when times are bad. Suspicion and accusation will center on the king. As Simonse demonstrates, this is not merely an occupational hazard of kingship; it is what being king is all about.

In fact, a good king may also be a hated one. To do his job properly, the king should serve as a lightning rod for animosity. Among the Bari, the ability to inspire hatred is one of the virtues ascribed to an admired ruler. Simonse brings out the logic behind this paradoxical attitude. The king transcends the divisions within the community most effectively when he himself stands in opposition to the community as a whole. He unifies his kingdom by uniting his subjects against him. The quintessential king is the enemy of his people.

But the relationship between king and people is in no way a static one. It is an ongoing drama, an ever shifting balance of power in which threats alternate with propitiatory gestures and each side resorts to a rich array of gambits and stratagems. Simonse brings this delicate ballet to life while introducing a brilliant new twist to the analysis: he shows that the adversarial relationship between king and people is strictly analogous to the adversarial relationship between

rival groups in a system of segmentary opposition. Both display a comparable admixture of cooperation and competition, of positive and negative reciprocity, within the same basic framework of mutual antagonism. This means that a single organizing principle can elucidate the operation of both centralist and dualist political systems. Acephalous segmentary societies and those with an assertive central authority turn out to be variations on the same theme. 'In its simplest form,' Simonse writes, 'centralism is only a transformation of dualism with a different cast: one of the social segments is replaced with the king.'

This stunning insight is far-reaching in its consequences. By reducing to a single principle two apparently distinct forms of interaction – that between king and people and that between antagonistic social segments – it lays the basis for something like a unified field theory of African political systems. At the same time, it points the way to understanding the emergence of the state as one possible outcome of a dynamic process, the result of an irreversible shift of the balance of power in the direction of the king. Finally, applied to Girardian theory, the same insight suggests the interchangeability of two alternative scapegoat scenarios: one focused on a central figure such as the Rainmaker, the other entailing a dualist opposition with an enemy group. Modern politicians instinctively grasp this interchangeability; when faced with public wrath at home, their first reflex is often to stir hostilities against an enemy abroad. We never truly leave the shadow of dualism, centralism and the scapegoat king.

It is impossible to overstate the achievement of this book. With an exemplary combination of empirical rigor and theoretical daring, *Kings of Disaster* transforms the landscape of African studies while forcing us to think in new ways about the origins of political power and the state. The hardest thing to do in reflecting on any institution is to break free of the retrospective illusion that it always was what it appears to be today. If we are convinced we already know what a king is, we are likely to assume that a scapegoat king can only be a king who is scapegoated. The figure Simon Simonse describes will be much more surprising to modern Western eyes. In this case the scapegoat's role comes first. The ruler is a scapegoat *before* he is a king.

Simonse's findings lend weight to René Girard's views on African sacred kingship. In his pioneering study *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard defines the African monarch as a victim whose execution has been deferred: 'The king reigns only by virtue of his future death' (1977:107). Simonse characterizes the king in similar terms as a 'victim in suspense.' Regicide is not every king's fate. If a monarch's reign is liberally sprinkled with rain, a grateful people will allow him to live out his natural life. This is the optimal outcome for all concerned. Yet 'the possibility of an assault on the king is never completely absent from the minds of his subjects.' It is a 'structural' and 'constitutive' feature of kingship, a dark cloud hovering over the Rainmaker's head. The sentence of death is only suspended for good behavior. Should a drought persist too long and the king stubbornly refuse to deliver the least precipitation, his exasperated subjects will eventually conclude that they have no choice but to lynch him. Simonse has compiled a number of cases, from the 19th century to the 1980s, in which rain kings or queens died at the hands of the collectivity.

The impressive evidence gathered by Simonse for his interpretation of the king as a victim in suspense should lead to a reconsideration of material from elsewhere in Africa. We will confine ourselves here to a single example. In his classic work *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner quotes a long passage from the 19th-century explorer Paul Du Chaillu's account of the installation of a Gabonese king. The first stage of the 'ceremony' observed by Du Chaillu recalls the dramatic end that awaits an unlucky Sudanese Rainmaker. Having been secretly chosen by

the village elders, the king-elect was 'kept ignorant of his good fortune' until the moment when his future subjects launched a surprise attack on him:

As he was walking on the shore on the morning of the seventh day [after the death of the former king] he was suddenly set upon by the entire populace... They surrounded him in a dense crowd, and then began to heap upon him every manner of abuse that the worst of mobs could imagine. Some spat in his face; some beat him with their fists; some kicked him; others threw disgusting objects at him; while those unlucky ones who stood on the outside, and could reach the poor fellow only with their voices, assiduously cursed him, his father, his mother, his sisters and brothers, and all his ancestors to the remotest generation. A stranger would not have given a cent for the life of him who was presently to be crowned (quoted in Turner, 1969:170-71).

This outpouring of collective fury went on for about half an hour. Although the future king's life was spared, it would be misleading to describe the violence of the attack as purely symbolic. The force of the assault may have been calibrated to avoid serious injury, but the blows that rained upon the victim were perfectly real. He was entirely at the mercy of his future subjects.

Victor Turner sees this as a case of 'the temporary reversal of the statuses of rulers and ruled.' He says that Du Chaillu's account illustrates both 'the humbling of a candidate in a rite of status elevation' and 'the power of structural inferiors in a rite of status reversal' (1969:171). This implies that the hierarchical relationship between ruler and ruled is the real phenomenon while the reversal of statuses is merely symbolic. But there is something very paradoxical about interpreting this stage of the Gabonese ritual as an example of status reversal. At the moment the man on the shore was attacked by his fellow villagers, they were not yet ruler and ruled. According to Du Chaillu, the most vigorous blows were accompanied by the cry, 'You are not our king yet.' How can a status be reversed before it even exists?

Simonse's study suggests an alternative approach: the role of victim comes first. To see the members of the crowd as the structural inferiors of their victim is an optical illusion produced by the future radiance of the king. In reality, the power of life or death originally lies with the collectivity. If it chose to finish off the recipient of its blows, the victim would be helpless to resist. This bare material fact must be the starting point for any objective analysis. At first, the crowd holds all the cards; it has its way with the victim before ultimately ceding power to him. This is the reversal that needs to be explained. Why should people submit to the authority of a poor wretch whom they seemingly wanted to beat within an inch of his life? The real mystery is the dramatic elevation in the victim's status that follows the near-lynching.

One key to the mystery is the unanimous participation of the 'entire populace'. Everyone joined together in directing their antagonism at the victim simultaneously. René Girard contends that any such ritual of collective violence is modeled on long-ago actual lynchings that allowed the members of a strife-torn group to reconcile themselves with one another by unanimously venting their hostilities on a common scapegoat. The scapegoat thus became the source of social consensus, to use the term adopted by Simonse. The apparently miraculous role it played in restoring harmony led to its posthumous apotheosis. Later sacrificial rituals reenact the same event, replacing the original scapegoat with substitute victims who inherit its glory.

Indeed, so lofty is the victim's status that the community may eventually hesitate to put it to death. There will be a tendency to sacrifice lesser victims in place of the most important one. Over time, Girard suggests, those who play the central part in the ritual may succeed in

postponing indefinitely the moment of their own execution, gradually parlaying the prestige associated with their role into a real power over the community (1978c:61-62). In the installation rites of sacred kingship, ontogenesis displays the traces of phylogenesis, giving us a chance to witness first-hand the metamorphosis of victim into ruler.

The different Rainmakers studied by Simonse would appear to be located at points about halfway along the path hypothesized by Girard. Among these Nilotic peoples the king's status is still in flux. The relationship between ruler and ruled has not yet crystallized into the permanent structural imbalance posited by Victor Turner; it see-saws back and forth, now favoring one side, now the other in a politico-ritual arena where the sacred embodiment of central authority is but one pole in an unending dualist confrontation. Simonse shows how a savvy Rainmaker can play to his best advantage the cards he is dealt, but the end of the game will ultimately depend on the weather. Sooner or later, a dearth of rain leads to a reverse metamorphosis of ruler into victim.

Simonse's richly textured ethnographic account confirms many key tenets of Girard's scapegoat theory, from the recourse to sacrifice of substitute victims as a means of forestalling regicide to the preference for methods allowing unanimous participation once the effective killing of the king can no longer be avoided. But the lynching, when it comes, does not resolve the crisis. Unlike the natural death of a king, it is perceived as a deeply inauspicious event. Girard foresees the possibility that the good and evil aspects of victimage may be divided from each other in like fashion through a secondary elaboration. Nevertheless, Simonse's phenomenological description of the victimary process and its aftermath does not fully correspond to what a familiarity with Girard's ideas might lead one to expect. According to Simonse, it is the anticipation of collective murder and not the event itself that exercises a unifying effect. A feeling of *suspense* is a defining feature of the drama.

Suspense regarding the outcome of the high-stakes confrontation with the Rainmaker is the engine that keeps the group moving forward as it navigates its uncertain way through a crisis provoked by drought. In such a context, actually going through with the murder can bring only a fleeting release of tension that solves nothing. Unless a sudden downpour ensues, the crisis is bound to continue, this time without the central figure of the king to provide a focal point for collective action. The ruler's death will be anticlimactic if its sole result is the dissipation of suspense.

The concept of suspense does not simply add an interesting new wrinkle to the scapegoat theory. In the last analysis, it makes the hypothesis of a victimary origin of kingship considerably more plausible. As imagined by René Girard, the leap from victim to ruler remains somewhat mysterious. It is not at all clear how the transition would play out in practice. How could a scapegoat postpone his own lynching long enough to convert his sacred status into temporal power?

Here Simon Simonse fills in the blanks, not only by detailing the nuts-and-bolts political maneuvering of Nilotic Rainmakers, but also by showing that *the community itself may have an interest in deferring the collective murder as long as possible*. If maintaining suspense is an essential unifying factor, then one understands why everyone might collude in keeping the scapegoat alive, thus opening up a decisive interval for the progressive transformation of victim into king.