

## Chapter 4

# The Shilluk *Reth*

## *Early King or Head of State? An Inter-Nilotic Exploration*

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After reading a draft of the preceding chapter, fellow anthropologists asked me how the comparative perspective on kingship presented there would work out for the kingship of the Shilluk. Among anthropologists and historians, the Shilluk king (*reth*) is one of the better-known cases of kingship in Africa and has been the subject of much anthropological discussion since James Frazer turned him into the centrepiece of the evidence in support of his idea that the drama of the dying god is a central theme in religious belief worldwide. The question asked by my colleagues may have been motivated by the presumption that the Shilluk might present an intermediate case between the early kingdoms of the *monyomiji*<sup>1</sup> and the early state of Buganda. In the first part of this chapter, I will show that the dynamic of complementary segmentary opposition that had relatively free play in the *monyomiji* societies and that had the potential of leading to all-out confrontations between the community and its king, was absent from Shilluk society by the time the first ethnographic observations were made. Instead, we find two permanently unequal classes: the *kwareth* (royals) who monopolized all initiatives to use violence and the *collo*, (commoners), who only used violence as followers of *kwareth*. The position of *reth* was frequently contested and was the prize for the prince (*nyireth*) who had staged the rebellion and won. Consolidation of his power was a central concern of the *reth*. Applying the list of strategies to consolidate the king's power that we identified in the previous chapter, we shall discover a great deal of commonality between the mode of operation of the Shilluk king and

that of his counterparts in the *monyomiji* cluster. It will then become clear the Shilluk king was far ahead in neutralising rival sources of power while the kingdom had become irreversibly stratified to the king's advantage.

**Table 4.1** Periods during which recorded observations were made of the autonomous operation of royal power in the three studied types of kingdom before their transformation by colonial incorporation

	<b>Time frame of observations</b>	<b>Authors and nature of accounts</b>
Kingdoms of the <i>monyomiji</i> cluster	1862–1914	accounts by missionaries, explorers, traders, Turco-Egyptian governors; from 1900–1914 intelligence reports by the Uganda Protectorate Administration
Buganda Kingdom	1861–90	detailed, synchronic observations, by explorers, missionaries and emissaries of foreign governments
Shilluk Kingdom	1826–61	impressionistic reports of traders and explorers; documents from literate neighboring communities

The assumption that the Shilluk practised regicide, or the denial that they ever did so, has been central to the academic debate on the nature of Shilluk kingship. Therefore, I cannot avoid touching on this issue. In the last section of this chapter, I will demonstrate that by adopting an intra-Nilotic comparative perspective, this more-than-a-century-old issue can be definitively laid to rest.

There is only one snag to this: in order to make a fair comparison, we need to compare the kingdoms at a point in time when their political systems were functioning autonomously, and when kings could still set their own agendas in dealing with their subjects and with foreigners.

The available information about our different cases of kingship is far from equal. Information about Shilluk internal social and political organization before the imposition of foreign rule is almost non-existent.<sup>2</sup> The missionaries Banholzer (1902–14) and Hofmayr (1906–16), who edited the ethnographic material found in the late Banholzer's diaries, the linguist Westermann (in 1911) and the anthropologist Seligman (in 1910) were the first to systematically collect information on the Shilluk, almost half a century after the imposition of foreign rule.

In the accounts written by Condominium administrators, it is not always clear whether their description refers to a remembered past that was

considered normative by the Shilluk they were dealing with, or to the situation contemporary to their administration.

### *The Undoing of Complementary Segmentary Opposition*

The Shilluk kingdom was spread out along the Nile as a 150-kilometre-long ribbon of settlements mainly on the west bank of the Nile. These settlements called *podh* in the Shilluk language were the largest political units on the level of the kingdom. In this chapter they will be referred to as ‘sections’, a term widely used for comparable socio-political units in South Sudanese societies. Oral tradition tells us that Nyikang, the first king and leader of the Shilluk migration, divided the land into ten sections. A list made by the colonial administration and published in Pumphrey (1941: 40–41; see also Howell, 1952: 99) enumerates eighty-nine sections grouped by the colonial administration into twelve or thirteen divisions.

The sections were included into two sets of partially overlapping moieties, grouping the whole band of settlements along the Nile into two camps that were mobilized, often on a competitive basis, for nationwide events. One set, Gerr (north) and Luak (south), was politically defined and served during the crisis years of the late nineteenth century as a support base for rivalling princes, while the other set, Gol Nyikang and Gol Dhiang had a more ceremonial character and their interaction played a key role in the royal installation ceremonies.

Pumphrey, writing in 1941, pointed out that:

‘There is a natural tendency of contiguous settlements to agglomerate, by reason of a common cause or of the existence of outstanding personality, into loose and impermanent confederacies, described by the term *luak*.’ (1941: 18).

This way of clustering is in line with Evans-Pritchard’s model of complementary segmentary opposition and is identical to what happened in the *monyomiji* societies. Often laid out in a (semi-)circle at the foot of a mountain, adjacent villages come to each other’s support. In the *monyomiji* societies, this clustering process frequently polarized into a confrontation between moieties. In the Shilluk case it seems that the number of sections was just too large for a moiety as a whole to get involved in an intersectional conflict. If moieties were mobilized at all, it was after being prompted by royalty in a top-down manner (Schnepel 1990: 115–18).

As a rule, according to Hofmayr (1925: 344), sections stopped fighting after a few casualties at a point when the number of victims on both sides was about equal. The king could use the fight as a pretext to raid the party that had started the fighting. The chiefs of the sections concerned therefore had an interest to quickly bring the parties together as a matter of urgency and negotiate peace by determining the bloodwealth for excess victims and overseeing its payment. During the Condominium period, the king participated in such meetings and demanded a share of the bloodwealth.

According to Howell, most feuds were between adjacent sections. Fighting between sections was punished by the royal army (*bang reth*). Instead of sending his own army, the king could request the sections adjacent to the one to be punished to raid a fixed number of cattle on his behalf (the 'royal levy'), while giving them *carte blanche* to burn villages of the neighbouring section and rewarding themselves with extra loot. This last practice may explain Howell's observation that adjacent sections were each other's worst enemies. It seems to be a particularly cynical application of the 'divide and rule' principle. However, Howell adds that sections preferred being punished by their neighbours to a direct attack by the king's army (Howell 1952: 113), a remark that points at a degree of local autonomy. Apparently, the sections concerned could secretly agree on how to minimize the damage of the royal levy.

The sections consisted of a number of villages (*myer*, sg. *pac*), each inhabited by a cluster of lineages, - usually distinguished in lineages of original settlers, and immigrant lineages. Though the villages were certainly not havens of peace, their conflicts rarely spilled over into wider society. For the villagers, interference in their problems by higher level authorities such as the section chief and the king usually meant trouble rather than help.

In the *monyomiji* societies, processes of fusion and fission of segments shifted from top to bottom and vice -versa, in response to the level of inclusiveness of the adversary the community had to deal with. In the Shilluk kingdom, bottom-up flexibility in the formation of coalitions has existed only at the level of the section. Sections were free to unite in military expeditions against enemies of the king as long as they gave him a share of the booty. All other processes of fusion and fission were top-down, driven by the dramas played out at the level of the royals. Kings mobilized sections and, occasionally, moieties to suit their own interests. If a society is so prone to division, war becomes the only remaining lever to keep all segments on

board. In fact, all the older records confirm the reputation of the Shilluk as a warring nation.

The relationship between *kwareth* and the *collo* was one of stratification rather than segmentation. The superiority of the royals was irreversible. Nyikang, their divine ancestor, was believed to have unilaterally collected the sections while migrating to Shillukland. The myth of origin that is shared by the related Anuak and Pari, and also by the Lotuho, has the ancestor king being captured from the river by his future subjects. This reverse scenario has been retained by the Shilluk as the beginning sequence of the royal installation ritual. The material from which the ceremonially important effigies of Nyikang and his son Dak are made are solemnly fished from the Nile (see below p.164).

Open confrontations between the people and the king as occurred in the *monyomiji* cluster were unthinkable in the Shilluk context. Browsing the literature on the Shilluk, the only account of a confrontation between the king and the people that I could discover was mythical:

‘Nyikang had to discover that his people hated him. They disrespected and insulted him, making him tired of life. When Nyikang found out that they were looking for an opportunity to kill him, he decided to kill himself.

One day, he called everyone together for a banquet. It lasted for four days and uncountable numbers of sheep and oxen were slaughtered. The praise of the host was on everyone’s lips. On the last day, a suddenly rising whirlwind scattered everybody. Nyikang used the opportunity to take his life; he allowed his face to be tied with a cloth so that breathing was no longer possible.’ (Hofmeyer, 1 1910: 330, author’s translation).

The showdown between King Nyikang and his people came to a premature end in an apparent act of ‘passive revenge’ by the king. Is the story telling us that there can only be unilaterally hierarchical relations between the king and his people, – as in Buganda, rocking the boat meaning suicide for the king and for the surviving people a perpetual state of guilt-ridden indebtedness?<sup>3</sup>

War united king and *collo* in a common project. The Shilluk were a feared enemy for their neighbours. Their compact mode of settlement must have given them an advantage over their pastoralist neighbours in terms of cultivating an *esprit de corps*, improving strategic and tactical skills and stimulating inventiveness. Contemporary assessments like this one by the Italian missionary-explorer Giovanni Beltrame, confirm the importance of war:

‘The Shilluk are the most turbulent, the boldest, the most treacherous and the most thievish people in the whole Valley of the White Nile. However, inside the tribe, the king and his section chiefs know how to use force to curtail this delinquent predisposition but when outsiders are targeted, the kings do nothing to stop them. Instead, they encourage their warriors because they receive part of the loot.’ (Beltrame 1881: 83).

Before being incorporated in the Ottoman Empire the Shilluk kingdom was a regional superpower. Its navy controlled the Nile banks up to Eleis, 400 kilometres north of Muomo, the northernmost Shilluk section. The raids were ventures of a number of sections led by the king. Hundreds of warriors took part in these waterborne expeditions. Beltrame was impressed by the degree of organization of the Shilluk fleets. As waterborne cattle-raiders attacking from the water, they were feared by the Dinka and Arab pastoralists on both Nile banks. The Shilluk raiders had developed a method of moving cattle home over water, hopping from island to island. By the mid-nineteenth century, Shilluk raids were so frequent that the Nile crossing point for caravans travelling between the Sennar and the Tegali kingdoms was abandoned (Mercer 1971: 410–11).

*Agem: Dynastic Rivalry and Regicide*

The Shilluk belong to a group of kingdoms in which succession used to be the outcome of a violent confrontation between royal pretenders to the throne. Shilluk history is full of kings who came to power after a showdown with a rival. There are several travellers’ reports of the excessive precautions that kings took against potential usurpers (Brun-Rollet 1855: 94; Lejean 1862: 871; Poncet 1863: 19; Beltrame 1881: 83). The reason given by Seligman for King Fadyet’s sleepiness during his interviews with him became the material for one of the most celebrated passages in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. The king was reported to stay awake during the night out of fear of a potential usurper (Frazer 1913, Pt. III: 22; Seligman 1932: 91).

The custom of taking the royal throne by force has been reported for several communities that once were part of the Funj kingdom and for the Anuak, the Shilluk’s closest cultural relatives. Because the Anuak were only brought under colonial administration after 1920, they may also offer a lead as to how succession worked among the Shilluk. Studies of the Anuak political system were carried out by Evans-Pritchard in the 1930s and 1940s, by Lienhardt in the 1950s, by Perner in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and, in Ethiopia, by Kurimoto, in the 1990s.

*Agem* is the name of the institution of the transfer of power. Translated by Evans-Pritchard as ‘revolution’ and by Lienhardt as ‘rebellion’, *agem* was practised to replace the headmen in the small-scale Anuak polities and the king in the larger Anuak kingdom. The *agem* was a joint venture of a legitimate pretender to the headmanship and a group of warrior-supporters (*luak*) of the would-be successor.

*Agem* was also the name of the Shilluk institution that ensured the succession of section chiefs before they became appointees of the king. Evans-Pritchard learnt this in an interview with Alfred Heasty, one of the founders of the Doleib Hill American Mission Station and the author of the first Shilluk-English dictionary (Evans-Pritchard 1971: 161). This information is significant because it confirms that within the living memory of Heasty’s informants, Shilluk sections selected their own chiefs, independent of the king.<sup>4</sup>

The Anuak *agem* was a divisive institution. The price the community paid for this open rivalry was high. In a period of just over a year in the early 1940s, Evans-Pritchard witnessed three of these revolutions in small-scale Anuak polities. In the first, there were twelve casualties, in the second, there were also twelve, and in the third, there were six. As a consequence of the number of casualties in the village where the first fight took place, the community fell apart into two separate polities.

For the relatives of the victims of these fights, it was impossible to negotiate compensation for the loss of life, because the only judge available was the winner of the fight. ‘Killing in a rebellion is compensated for by killing in a rebellion’ runs the Anuak maxim (Lienhardt 1958: 32). It is this logic of negative reciprocity that explains why succession came to alternate between two – and, in the case of the Shilluk, three – lineages of the royal clan. The alternation is not a selection criterion developed to limit the number of eligible candidates for the throne, as Schnepel (1990: 106–7) suggests, but a corollary of succession by *agem*. Alternation could only have become a positive rule after the colonial administration banned *agem*. Hofmayr puts the problem very succinctly: ‘Once the king has been killed the judges dealing with the case will be the perpetrators of the murder’ (1925: 179).<sup>5</sup>

Lienhardt also perceived a political benefit for the community in *agem*:

The Anuak speak of *agem*, rebellion, with great enthusiasm; and it is possible even for a stranger to see eventually that it is by virtue of constant ostracisms of headmen that the Anuak are able to avoid diffused and uncontrolled conflict within the village, and to rule themselves, rejecting any submission to the symbol of their implicit contract which they themselves have created. (1957: 32)

Lienhardt's view echoes Evans-Pritchard's assessment of Shilluk royal rivalry in his Frazer Lecture, which also points at the intimate link between kingship and consensual antagonism:

It must here be remarked that Shilluk rebellions have not been made *against* the kingship. On the contrary, they were made to preserve the values embodied in the kingship which were being weakened, or it was believed so, by the individual who held office. They were not revolutions but rebellions against the king in the name of kingship. (Evans-Pritchard, 1948: 83)

This may be true, but *agem* only united a part of the population behind the new incumbent, and *against* another part that was expected to one day take revenge. It made the kingship divisive, not unifying, as in the *monyomiji* societies. In the latter case, if there was a stand-off between the people and the king, and the issue at stake – usually rain – was not resolved, the opposition to the king would grow, gradually including all sections, age-classes, men and women, and, ultimately, leading to regicide.

#### *The Shilluk King's Strategies to Consolidate His Power*

The main threat to the Shilluk king's life did not come from his people, but from his royal rivals, of whom there were many. For him, the strengthening of his grip on the throne was also a central concern. In the previous chapter, eight strategies were identified that were deployed by the *monyomiji* kings to tip the balance of power in their favour. Let us see whether and how these and similar strategies worked out in the context of Shilluk kingship.

### **Generate Wealth and Create Dependants**

Like the Anuak headman (Lienhardt 1958: 35) and the *monyomiji* kings, the Shilluk king was the beneficiary of his subjects' agricultural labour. Villages were ordered by the palace to take turns in clearing and weeding the king's land. According to Tappi (1903: 122), the king was the only beneficiary, while sectional and village chiefs had to work their own fields. The

explicitness of the addition may suggest that the exclusivity of this privilege was a recent achievement by the king.

The king was heir to the largest herd of cattle of the kingdom. The royal herd had been built over many generations. The most precious cattle were those descending from the herd of the dynastic ancestor Nyikang. The royal herd must have allowed the king to marry as many wives as he wished and also to provide wives for any of his sons (*nyireth*) and for his clients.

The marriages of the king were an important political tool. When a wife became pregnant, she returned to her village of birth, where the child – who would be one of the potential heirs to the throne – would grow up and be at the centre of a royalist colony. This strategy of ‘planting princes in the periphery’ was also practised by the Lotuho and the Bari. The section where the prince grew up was destined to become his support base once he reached the stage where he would compete for the royal succession.

As a result of this policy, the royal clan (*kwareth*) had a presence in all sections and was by far the largest in the kingdom. The large size of the royal clan also meant that there was a huge reservoir of potential rivals. If conflicts about princely entitlement escalated, *collo* could not avoid being part of the fighting.

## **Create a Royal Army (Bang Reth) and Use Firearms**

As early as the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the king was reported to possess firearms. Most of the soldiers in the king’s army were war captives and debt slaves. Families who owed the king a debt, a fine or did not have the available cattle to reimburse a loan often provided the king with a family member to serve him as the guarantor of the payment. When the king presided over the settlement of a feud, he demanded, in addition to the bloodwealth paid to the family of the victim, one man or the man’s equivalent in heads of cattle to serve in the army. After the closure of the slave market of Khartoum, many slave traders moved to Kaka, which had a market overseen by the Shilluk king and was outside the zone where slaving was prohibited by the Egyptian government. When the market closed, many slaves were absorbed into the king’s army.

## **Create Alliances with Neighbouring Kingdoms**

There is little information about kings' alliances with surrounding kingdoms. From Hofmayr's king-lists, we know that a number of kings married foreign princesses, which provides an indication of political alliances:

- Dak married an Anuak princess as the conclusion of a war expedition into Anuak land. After Dak's marriage, every king is said to have married a wife from Anuak;
- Bwoc married a Nuba wife who became the mother of king Tokot;
- Tokot ruled that each king should at least marry one wife from the Nuba and one from the Dinka;
- Tugo is known to have divorced his Nuba wife because of her poor cooking;
- Kudit's mother could have been a Nuba. When his brother Tyelgut assassinated
- all the eligible *nyireth*, fifty in number, he fled to the Nuba Mountains. His hosts offered to avenge the murder of the fifty princes, but Kudit stopped them (Hofmayr 1925: 62–87).

How exactly these marriages served the international relations of the kingdom is not remembered. In the nineteenth century, the most important allies of the kings became the successive governments in Khartoum. The sources on possible alliances between Shilluk princes and the Mahdist rulers in Khartoum are contradictory.

### **Centralize Royal Power by Abolishing the Age-Class System**

The Shilluk age-system organized the young men at the level of the section (*podh*). The Shilluk age-system must have been 'in tune' with the age-systems of the surrounding peoples. I found no records of age-grades of different sections joining in ceremonies or in warfare, as was common practice among the Nuer and in the *monyomiji* societies. Age-sets were divided into three age-based subdivisions: 'head', 'neck' and 'middle'. As in the *monyomiji* societies, young men were eager to become warriors and push their predecessors out into retirement. The age-grade of warriors was led by a sectional war leader (*bany*) who was a member of an age-grade senior to that of the warriors. Participation was compulsory for all young men.

The cicatrization of the forehead, characteristic for Shilluk men, was performed in the context of the promotion ceremony of the age-set. The age-system must have provided an important countervailing power to that of the king for a long time. Hofmayr (1925: 342) briefly mentions ‘our army of unmarried lads divided in age-grades’, adding that their chairmen/choir-leaders were appointed by the sectional chiefs. Seligman (1932: 46) tried to collect information on the age-system, but never got a straight answer to his questions. Were age-classes a sensitive subject in the circles of King Fadyet, who received the Seligmans? Howell mentions that the king considered the age-classes to be a subversive influence. A chiefs’ meeting in 1934 advocated an age limit for the *bany* (Howell 1952: 107). Age-classes were formally banned in 1941 in a ruling that had the full agreement of both King Papit and the colonial government. Despite the ban, one southern section appointed a new *bany* in 1947 and set out to parade him in the chief village of the northern moiety. They passed within earshot of the palace in Fashoda singing their songs. A stand-off between the king and the warrior age-set followed.

In the article in which Howell discusses the case, he takes the side of the *bany* and his age-set pleading that an aggressive self-presentation should be expected from warriors that are being stopped from fighting (Howell 1941: 56–60; Howell 1952: 108–13). As an episode in a power contest between the king and the warrior age-grade, the incident shows that even under Condominium rule, the king was concerned about his power base. Here we see the Shilluk king winning a political battle against the bottom-up age-system that his counterparts in the *monyomiji* cluster never managed to win.

## **Centralize the Kingdom by Bringing the Sections under Direct Royal Control**

The historical evidence suggests that the sections of the kingdom that lost a great deal of independence after the Shilluk were brought under the Egyptian sphere of influence. From being led by an aristocrat who succeeded to the chieftaincy by *agem*, the section-chief became a *jago*, a word meaning ‘second-in-command’ in many Lwoo languages. The *jago* continued to enjoy some autonomy when carrying out raids. He paid a percentage of the value of the booty to the king. Needham (1980), who suggested that the section chiefs exercised ‘political sovereignty’ in a hierarchical system in which the king

exercised 'sacred sovereignty', completely misses the competitiveness that animated Shilluk kingship.

Before the establishment of Condominium rule, when the king still had his army, the king asserted his authority by raiding 'disorderly' sections as a punishment and by a policy of divide and rule (see also p. 147). It was also a context in which feuds between sections were rampant, went very deep and were long-lasting. Howell examined a feud that lasted from 1905 to 1932. During those years, it resulted in thirteen violent incidents in which forty-six men died and many more were injured. Only in 1932 was the king able to persuade the parties to reach a settlement (Howell 1952: 108). One could ask whether an intersectional feud could have lasted that long if the king had still disposed of his army. Howell, who had earlier served as an administrator in the Nuer and Dinka districts, considered the feuds of the Shilluk 'bloodier and more lasting than any likely to occur among the Dinka and Nuer' (ibid.: 106).

With the establishment of Condominium rule, the power of the king quickly diminished. From every murder case tried under his auspices, he received one boy for his army in addition to the girl paid to the party of the victim (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 46). When the government prohibited the transfer of persons in the payment of bloodwealth, only cattle were used at the traditional rate of ten head of cattle for a victim. The portion for the king was no longer fully paid and quickly became smaller (Howell 1952: 114). The practice of paying a person to the king also explains the reluctance of lower-level chiefs to submit cases to higher-level jurisdiction (see also p. 147).

During Condominium rule, the role of the king became increasingly that of a peacemaker. He often acted alongside the District Commissioner, persuading the parties to accept the verdict of the court or the peace deal proposed. He presided over the accompanying sacrifices and occasionally, in order to underline the historic importance of an event, provided a cow that was descended from Nyikang's own herd (Howell 1952: 113).

## **Consolidate the Kingdom's Cohesion by Regularly Waging War on Enemies**

Not only was the competition between princes for the throne divisive, but so was the manner in which the king repressed sectional subversion. Warfare

with outsiders was the easiest option to keep the segments of the kingdom aligned. Names of kings were identified with the wars they had fought, as Hofmayr's king-list shows (1925: 59–136).

## **Diversify the Social Composition of the Kingdom and Introduce Complementarity in the Division of Labour**

In the literature I consulted, I found no specific traces of complementary role-relationships that might have developed in the context of the role that the Shilluk played during the nineteenth century in regional trade and in hosting a community of foreign traders in Kaka. If there were any, they may have remained short-lived. The king's army, consisting of men in debt-bondage, war-captives, and slaves operating under a top-down discipline different from that of warrior age-sets, was part of a general transformation of the kingdom around the unilateral, nonreciprocal relationship between the king and the people, and by extension between *kwareth* and *collo*.

## **Trade**

Trade was an important asset in the power of the king. As early as 1840, the Shilluk king maintained an embassy in Khartoum to promote and control trade with his country. He offered protection to trading caravans for a price. This safe conduct was absolutely reliable according to reports by traders. The protection must have been ensured by the *bang reth* and not by the warriors, as Mercer suggests (Mercer 1971: 418).

In 1843, the king established a market in Kaka supervised by his appointees. For a long time, this was the only place in the kingdom where foreigners were allowed – apparently, a measure to stop traders from dealing with other Shilluk partners.

The king established a monopoly on ivory and guns. When Egypt abolished the slave trade in the 1850s, the slave markets moved to the south, outside the territory controlled by the Turco-Egyptian government. Kaka became an international boomtown. Political enemies of the government in Khartoum also flocked to Shilluk-land as refugees.

The royal stores in Fashoda were filled to the brim with merchandise (Mercer 1971: 423). This wealth must have served the king to build the *bang reth* and to provide them with firearms. This, in turn, increased his leverage to raise taxes in cattle he traditionally received from his subjects. According

to Schnepel (1990: 115), this must have been the time that the balance of power between the section chiefs and the king shifted in favour of the king.

## **Establish and Promote a Cult that Unified the Dynasty and Regulated Succession**

The generalized discord produced by the relentless competition for power of the princes combined with sectional rivalry cried out for ideas that could unite the people among themselves and with their king. King Tugo, who ruled the Shilluk kingdom from 1690 to 1710, is credited with the establishment of Fashoda as the capital and with the introduction of the cult of Nyikang, the ancestor of the royal clan (Hofmayr 1925: 77). Apparently, before Tugo's rule, kings were peripatetic, moving from section to section in order to collect tributes, to perform sacrifices and to settle conflicts, like the kings in the *monyomiji* cluster (Simonse 2017: 258–61).

The new cult which is being observed till the present day involves the following:

- The belief that each king is and should be a successor of Nyikang. From the moment the king is enthroned, the spirit of Nyikang is believed to inspire him. The king's actions and statements are fully in line with Nyikang's intentions. Any action of the king is an expression not just of his own will, but also of the will of Nyikang (Hofmeyer, 1925: 48).
- The building and maintenance of shrines in all sections of the country, where Nyikang could be invoked and sacrifices for rain could be made.
- An elaborate script for the enthronement of the new king that consisted of a series of ceremonies that resulted in the identification of the new king with the figure of Nyikang. The installation is so organized that a large cross-section of the population participates.
- A large, coherent body of myths and legends about Nyikang as the dynastic ancestor and the Shilluk cultural hero, which must have replaced earlier, more diverse and localized oral traditions.
- A loose collection of beliefs regarding appearances of Nyikang – in wind, in particular animals, in behaviours of people affected by his power, etc.

This cult ensured that there could only be one true king at any time. Any person claiming to be king who had not been subjected to the formal installation procedure did not represent Nyikang and had no right to the throne. The scenario of the installation ceremonies was extensive and full of dramatic detail.<sup>6</sup>

Two separate but intertwined sequences can be distinguished in the proceedings: one focused on the relationship of the new king to Nyikang, and another, more archaic, sequence focused on the sacrificial role of the king extending from his designation as king to his final enshrinement in his village of birth. The execution of the first sequence is in the hands of the *Nyikwom*, 'the men of the four-legged sacred stool', the 'enthroners'. This sequence dates from the reign of King Tugo, who is remembered as having created the installation ceremonies. Of the other sequence, a special group of royals called the *Oro* was in charge. They managed the king's sacred being: from the incest he committed during the period of seclusion to his dying and funeral. The *Oro* were once members of the royal clan, but had been degraded and no longer qualified for the kingship. There are several stories about why and how they were degraded. It is also obvious that the officials who managed the dying process of the king could not be in the same social category as those competing for the succession.

The first sequence starts with the search for Nyikang in the river abode of his mother, who is a half-crocodile. A piece of ambatch wood appears from the river and is crafted into an effigy of Nyikang. Artists from all over the country contribute to the finishing of the effigy. The enthroners, surrounded by a mock army, carry the effigy of Nyikang from its northerly temple to the south, where the king-elect is waiting. At the moiety boundary, the army of the northern moiety (Gol Dhiang) carrying the effigy and that of the southern moiety (Gol Nyikang) clash in a mock battle. In the melee, the enthroners capture the king-elect and establish physical contact between him and Nyikang's effigy. They then take the king and the effigy to the house of Nyikang in Fashoda. There they put the king on the four-legged throne where Nyikang, as a spiritual being, takes possession of the king.

The Shilluk king is captured by the spirit of kingship. This capture scenario is the diametrical opposite of that played out on his Anuak counterpart. The enthronement of the Anuak king is conditional on the aspiring king's succeeding in *capturing* of the royal necklaces. Lt. Col. Bacon, the army officer sent to obtain the king's submission to the

Condominium government in Khartoum, witnessed the installation ceremony of King Akwei Cam in 1920. When the Master of Ceremonies had seated the new king on the higher of two four-legged stools, he placed the royal necklaces around the king's neck and handed him the royal drum and a short drumstick. The king then beat the drum and took the oath of office: 'I am a true son of the king; I am wearing the royal necklaces and sitting on the throne. If I am not a son of the king, let me die!' (Bacon 1924: 116).<sup>7</sup>

If we assume that the Anuak installation ceremony represents an archaic variant of that of the Shilluk, the innovation introduced by King Tugo transformed the enthronement from an act of victorious self-promotion into one in which a humbled prince is captured by a dynastic power greater than himself. This reading is the diametrical opposite of Graeber's proposition:

Divine kingship ... refers not to the identification of rulers with supernatural beings ... but to *kings who make themselves the equivalent of gods*—arbitrary, all powerful beings beyond human morality—through the use of arbitrary violence. (Graeber 2011: 13)

The conduct required from the new Shilluk king during his installation is one of humble respect for the rules of succession. The gist of Tugo's reform was that the installation was not a divinization of the person of the king, but that it was the *royal office* that was divine and not the person holding it. The new Nyikang cult was aimed to contain succession rivalry. This matches the way King Tugo is remembered as a particularly peaceful king 'concerned to bring happiness and prosperity to his people' (Hofmayr 1925: 76).

There is no lack of Shilluk kings who would fit Graeber's profile of a defiant, amoral, superhuman being: Tyelgut (*ca.* 1765) and Akoj (*ca.* 1840) are good examples (Hofmayr 1925: 83, 96). These kings do not represent the spirit of the Nyikang cult. They may have been the type that King Tugo wanted to exclude from power. Their violent style brings them closer to the kings of Buganda.

*Safeguarding the King's Sacrificial Destiny: The Reth's Dying from an Inter-Nilotic Perspective*

The old-time religion, before the introduction of the cult of Nyikang, was centred on the king's sacrificial role and extended from his installation to the enshrinement of his mortal remains in his village of birth. It began with the official announcement (or is condemnation a better term?) of the prince's designation as king by the royal electoral college. The pronouncement was

made by the son of the Chief of Gol Nyikang, the southern moiety. It ran as follows: 'You are now our Dinka slave. We are going to kill you.'

The next important step in the sacrificial sequence is made after the spirit of Nyikang has taken possession of the new king. The king enters a three-day seclusion in a makeshift shelter (*adul*) erected for the installation. He is treated as a simple cowboy and regularly humiliated. His body is washed alternately with hot and cold water and adorned with the bracelets, ankle-bands, skins and precious beads that are the insignia of royal office. One of the nights is spent with a half-sister from the Ororo clan, an act classified as *akwalo* (incest). The public installation following the seclusion takes place under the responsibility of the *Nyikwom*, while the king's achievements and failures as a ruler are judged with reference to the cult of Nyikang.

Only when the king gets old or sick do the king's wives belonging to the Ororo clan reappear on the scene. Measures must be taken to prevent the king's death from occurring naturally. In most cases, a cloth is pushed onto the king's face so that he is suffocated. While it is clear that the Ororo wives of the king play the crucial role, unambiguous information on the decision-making process leading to the king's assisted death is lacking.<sup>8</sup>

Wailing is prohibited in the whole of the kingdom. The king's body is sealed up in a house until it has decomposed. In the past, the king would be accompanied into the grave house by a nubile virgin. There are older traditions that speak of kings having been buried alive.

When the king's body has decomposed, the bones are returned to his village of birth. Ororo men dig his grave and build a hut on top of it that will serve as the late king's shrine. This is followed by several days of continuous dancing.<sup>9</sup>

The episode in which the king is killed or 'is assisted to die', as the case may be, was surrounded with secrecy and mystery. This secrecy may be a side effect of King Tugo's promotion of the public Nyikang cult that seems to have given the king's sacrificial death a more private character. We should also be aware that the mystery surrounding Shilluk regicide could very well be an artefact of the anthropological interest in the subject that began with Seligman, who eagerly interpreted the bits and pieces of information he collected on the deaths of Shilluk kings as a mirror image of Frazer's drama of the *Rex Nemorensis*.

Evans-Pritchard was aware of Seligman's bias and proposed an interpretation of Shilluk regicide that was based on his understanding of Anuak succession rivalry and especially of *agem*. He argued that there was no ethnographic evidence of 'ritual regicide' (Evans-Pritchard 1948). Subsequently, dozens of anthropologists picked the version of the facts that suited their theoretical preference. It should be noted that Schnepel in his otherwise admirable listing of the episodes of the king's installation and funeral skips the killing of the king. His summary begins with a scene where the king is already lying in state, for which no background is provided. For Graeber, the regicidal scene is just another piece of evidence showing the decisive role of violence in the emergence of kingship. While I agree with Graeber's view on the crucial role of violence, the regicidal scene made famous by Frazer and Seligman has a different meaning, as I will now show by making a comparison with the funeral practices of other Nilotic kings.

The announcement 'You are now our slave; you are our Dinka war-captive' as the opening of the sacrificial trajectory is a declaration of 'capture'. Capture is also a customary way in which the *monyomiji* bring the new king's status home to him. He is captured at an unexpected place and time<sup>10</sup> against the wishes of the future king and his family. Upon receiving the news of their nephew's designation to be king, the maternal relatives of the new Lulubo king immediately run to the *monyomiji* demanding bloodwealth.<sup>11</sup>

The Lokoya *monyomiji* used to abduct their new king as if he were a leopard. They dropped him at the home of the Master of the Hunt, who will domesticate him by making him shoes of giraffe leather and by smearing his body with giraffe fat, metamorphosing the carnivore into an herbivore. When the king dies, he is reunited with the animals he was separated from at his installation. These animals are expected to congregate at his grave. When, at the death of their king, the Lopit fear that the king is not returning to his former state, they move a leopard skull in front of his face to remind him of his pre-royal companions. In some old Shilluk practices, there are remote echoes of the same way of proceeding. For instance, royals did not have their lower incisors removed like their 'cultured' commoners (Hofmayr 1925: 349; Seligman and Seligman 1932: 72). During the enshrinement dance, men imitate the roaring of lions (Howell and Thomson 1946: 25).

Immediately after death, kings in the Lotuho- and Bari-speaking communities had their bodily orifices plugged with a paste-like substance or

with leaves or both. If it is not done, informants say, general disorder in nature and society would follow. A predator may jump up from the deathbed. People believe that there is a charge inside the king's body that is beneficial for the community, but also very dangerous if released irresponsibly. The utmost care must be taken that the blessings are not lost or spoilt by maleficent forces. The same reason is given for the taboo on wailing and making noise at the king's death. Any sacrifices accompanying the king's death should also be noiseless, by suffocation or strangling. Communities that plug the king's orifices with a mixture of leaves and sesame paste remove the plugs before burial. Their removal, their conveyance by old women (interrupted by stops at fixed stations where they devotedly kneel) and their disposal in a riverbed are believed to be among the most sacred duties a person could ever perform. What was dropped in the river was the dangerous, potentially destructive forces clinging to the king's body with the ultimate aim of safeguarding the integrity of the 'power of the king's blessings'.

I must make mention of the remarkable interpretation of the same scenario by some west bank Bari-speaking communities. The body of the king was put on a sorghum-drying platform and allowed to bloat until the corpse started releasing liquid. At that time, peace, rain and food are believed to spread over the land 'like the air from a punctured ball', as an informant put it.

One community in the *monyomiji* area, the Pari, who migrated from the northeast and spoke a dialect of Northern Lwoo like the Shilluk and Anuak, observes a different custom of disposing of the king's body. While they are fully integrated into the *monyomiji* cluster, they have kept many customs from their place of origin, one being the way of dealing with their dying king. A few years ago, during a trip to his research area, the anthropologist Eisei Kurimoto was told that when the Pari King Fidele Ongang was about to die in 1980, his body and face had been covered with the freshly removed skin of a bull especially killed for that purpose. The skin was pressed against the mouth and nose of the king by a close kinsman so that the king died of suffocation. This was done, Kurimoto's informants (who were both members of the royal clan) told him, 'to preserve the *gweth* of the king'. *Gweth* is the opposite of *cien*, the posthumous curse left by a person who dies while in discord with his family or community. It is the dying king's power of blessing.<sup>12</sup>

It is obvious that the Pari practice is an archaic version of what the Shilluk do using a cotton cloth. The switch to a piece of cloth could be explained by the greater privacy of the Shilluk king's death after Tugo's reform. The fact that women (the Ororo wives of the king) were put in charge of the procedure may also explain why the slaughter of a bull was abandoned.

The conclusion that in these three cases we are dealing with the same ritual procedure – the purification, optimization and celebration of the blessings of the dead king – is compelling. The difference is in the body functions used to make the ritual point. The Bari and Lotuho have picked the digestive process as the transformative agent, while the Pari and the Shilluk opted for the respiratory system.<sup>13</sup>

For the Shilluk and the Pari, but also for the Dinka, breath (*wei* in Shilluk and Dinka, and *jwei* in Pari) is the carrier and manifestation of the force of life. At death, this vital force is not lost. In the case of a sacrificial animal, it is the *wei* of the sacrificial victim that boosts the wellbeing of the community (Lienhardt 1961: 207), and so it does when a Dinka Master of the Fishing Spear dies. In certain sections and clans of the Dinka, the culturally preferred death of the Spearmaster was to be buried alive when reaching an advanced age. This was a momentous religious occasion. The *wei* released at the moment of death was believed to be the Spearmaster's ultimate blessing for his people and should at all costs be prevented from accidentally 'expiring':

What [the Dinka] represent in contriving the death which they give him is the conservation of the 'life' which they themselves think they receive from him, and not the conservation of his own personal life. (Lienhardt 1961: 300)

In other Dinka sections, the Masters of the Fishing Spear used to be strangled or suffocated when they reached old age. We may assume that the concern that motivated this mode of dying was the same as that of being buried alive: control in the capture of the king's *wei* (Titherington 1925: 196; Seligman and Seligman 1932: 196–98; Bedri 1939 and 1948). All this adds substance to the argument that the Shilluk 'regicide' is part of the widely spread Nilotic practice of 'catching life in the spell of the king's death' (Simonse 1992; Simonse 2017, Chapter 18).

When digestion is the symbolic medium, the management of the release of the blessings can wait until after the king has died. But respiration can only

be controlled when it is still occurring. When we compare the death of the Shilluk kings to that of their Equatorial counterparts, their being killed appears to be a ritual technicality, imposed by the choice of body symbolism, a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

Interestingly, Dinka vocabulary still appears to carry a trace of the symbolic equivalence of respiration and digestion. The Dinka word *wei* also refers to 'chyme', the stomach contents in the process of digestion. While Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt are both well aware of the purificatory and life-enhancing use of rumen in ritual, they stop short at making the connection (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 214; Lienhardt 1961: 256, 294).

If this analysis is correct, the rationale of Shilluk regicide is not the maintenance of the positive, imitative relationship between the king's health and the country's wellbeing that Seligman (1934) and Frazer postulated, but the concern that an uncontrolled death of the king might spoil its blessings.

In the Bari and Lotuho kingdoms, no successor was installed until the 'reign of the dead king' was complete. The installation of a new king would interfere with the flow of blessings from the dead king and backfire. In some areas, the reign of the dead king lasted up to four years. During this period, there was a taboo on all behaviour associated with violence, dancing, drumming, noise, etc. The only indication that the Shilluk may also have respected a 'reign of the dead king' is the duration of the interregnum of four to thirteen months reported by Schnepel (1988: 443). Depending on the season during which the king died, this might be the shortest period possible, and the longest necessary for the dead king's rain to preside over one harvest. Nowadays, for the Shilluk, the period after the king's death is known as the 'year of fear' because of the ongoing succession strife. In this respect, Shilluk succession has more in common with that in Buganda where the interregnum was also a period of violent disorder and fear.

## **Conclusion**

In the preceding chapter I argued that it was possible to overcome the dichotomy that *African Political Systems* postulates between Group A (hierarchical, centralized) and Group B (acephalous, segmentary) societies if, from the start of our analysis, we focus on the power relationship that is constitutive for the political entity under study. It then appears that in a number of African kingdoms, the relationship between the king and his

subjects plays out in much the same way as the ‘balanced opposition’ that is characteristic of segmentary societies. I labelled such kingdoms where royal power was permanently in the balance ‘early kingdoms’.

In these kingdoms, the oppositional relationship between the king and the people compelled the king to strengthen his position. The ultimate outcome of this royal drive for domination were polities in which the king ended up monopolizing the use of physical force – Max Weber’s primary criterion for a political entity to qualify as a state. Within states, social relations tend to be restructured along unilateral, top-down lines, while the complementarity of social roles gradually replaces reciprocity.

Among the Nilotic kingdoms in South Sudan, the Shilluk kingdom is by far the largest and the most elaborate. It has greater time depth, a larger population than other kingdoms, and its kings have gone a longer way in terms of eliminating or subordinating rival sources of political power, such as the age-class system and the sections and their chiefs. The royals (*kwareth*) who live spread over the whole extent of Shillukland form a distinct class superior to the commoners, the *collo*, and have privileged access to the king. Their dispersal over the kingdom contributes to its geographical cohesion. By providing patronage to commoners in their area of residence, they play an integrative role vertically between the royals and the *collo*.

This royal upper stratum of the Shilluk is larger and more clearly marked and institutionalized than in the societies of the *monyomiji* cluster. One reason for this difference is that the time depth of the *monyomiji* rain-dynasties is relatively shallow. Among the peoples of the Upper Nile, the Bari who border the *monyomiji* cluster on the west, come closest to the Shilluk set-up. Like the Shilluk their society was stratified in a royal class (*kör*), a class of free commoners (*böngön*) and various unfree groups (*‘dupi, tomonok*) while their age-class system was patronized by *big men*. At the peak of its power during the early nineteenth century, the Bari kingdom of the Bekat straddled the Nile over a distance equal to the length of the Shilluk kingdom and had at least as large a population. The Bari kingdom fell apart, while the Shilluk kingdom survived the upheavals of the late nineteenth century. This chapter suggests that the relative stability of the Shilluk kingdom may be due to the Nyikang cult that established a framework for the legitimacy of succession that the Bari lacked and maybe needed more due to

their more intense exposure to invading powers that were eager to make use of their internal rivalry.

By indiscriminately attacking sections of his kingdom that he suspected of disloyalty and by ordering sections to attack one another in the king's name, the Shilluk king went a long way towards destroying the capacity of the sections to unite against him and in so doing building a political body that was unilaterally top-down. Yet the sections survived – and so did the clan and lineage-based constituent divisions of the sections. The Shilluk kings did not touch the lineage-based access to land as the kings of Buganda did.

Because the power of the king of Buganda trickled all the way down into the capillaries of local communities, in order to remain credible and keep his people together, the king was less dependent on a continued performance in the battlefield, as seems to have been the case for the Shilluk king. Taking into account the scale of the political body and the degree of transformation of its constituent social relations into top-down, unilateral complementarity, the Shilluk case might be halfway between a nascent early kingdom – like the small-scale kingdoms in the *monyomiji* cluster – and a fully fledged early state like Buganda.

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## Notes

1. The societies of the *monyomiji* cluster distinguish themselves by practising a system of 'dual rule', by the age-grade of adult men (*monyomiji*) on one side and by the king on the other. They occupy the mountainous east bank of the Nile between the Bari to their west and the Kidepo river as their eastern boundary. They include the Lulubo, the Lokoya, the Pari, the Horiok, the Lotuho, the Lomiya, the Ngotira, the Dorik, the Tenet and the Ngaboli (the last five collectively known as 'Lopit'), the Dongotono, the Logir, the Ketebo, the Lokwa, the Lorwama and the, Imotong (the last

six collectively known as ‘Lango’). All are speakers of dialects of the Eastern Nilotic language that is spoken by the Lotuho, the largest and best known group, except the Lulubo, Tenet and Pari. The Lulubo (Olu’bo in their own language) are Central Sudanic, the Tenet are Surma speakers and the Pari belong to the Western Nilotic Northern Lwoo group like the Shilluk and the Anuak. I follow the convention to use the term ‘Lwoo’ for the language group and Luo as the name of the two ethnic groups in Kenya and South Sudan. The cluster counts more than thirty kingdoms varying in size from a single village to the fifteen large agglomerations that make up the Lotuho kingdom of the Mayya dynasty. On the *monyomiji* age-system, see Kurimoto and Simonse (1998: Chapters 2 and 3).

2. Patricia Mercer’s article (1971) on Shilluk trade before the kingdom’s inclusion in the Egyptian Sudan helps to fill this important gap.
3. This story may also be read as a Shilluk reflection on the way in which Dinka Spearmasters ended their lives, some taking the initiative to be buried alive, others being killed by their community (Lienhardt 1961: 310). Nyikang ends up using the typical Shilluk suffocation technique. The story does not say who tied the cloth.
4. Evans-Pritchard only published Heasty’s information in 1971, more than thirty years after collecting it, in a French journal. The article also contains a long list of ethnographic errors made by Seligman in his Shilluk chapter in *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (Seligman and Seligman 1932). Evans-Pritchard considers his discovery of the use of the term *agem* among the Shilluk significant and urges future researchers to follow up on it. Heasty was Seligman’s key informant and Seligman was instrumental in bringing Evans-Pritchard to Sudan.
5. The way in which alternation of succession between royal lineages was practised in the Funj area offers further confirmation of this. On his very first research trip in Sudan in 1924, Evans-Pritchard collected information on regicide in the Funj area. In the community of Jebel Ulu, out of twelve successive kings, four had been killed by enemies. Another four were killed by agnatic brothers or a son (descendants in the same patriline, but of a different lineage), while three of these killers succeeded their victim (Evans-Pritchard 1932: 14). In Jebel Kele, out of ten kings, five had been killed by an agnatic brother or son and three of these killers succeeded their victims (ibid.: 43). The regicide scenario among the Berta of Fazogli, where the last two kings (Yassin and Asussu) were killed in 1838 and *ca.* 1872 respectively, seems closer to that of the *monyomiji* societies (Lepsius 1853: 202; Marno 1874: 68; Evans-Pritchard 1932: 44–46).
6. For a detailed summary, see Schnepel (1988).
7. Akwei Cam was the son of Cam Akwei who rebuffed the British patrol sent in 1912 to conquer his kingdom. At the young age of twelve, he inherited the necklaces from his father. He did not acquire them by *agem*. Before the ceremony took place, a rival prince across the border in Ethiopia had already manifested his displeasure at Akwei’s enthronement. Elements of the Anuak ceremony of enthronement are recognizable in the more evolved Shilluk ceremony, e.g. the holding of the four-legged stool by prostrate enthroners when the new king is made to sit on it for the first time (Bacon 1921: 164).
8. Schnepel (1991: 42–50) provides a useful summary of the discussion on this topic.
9. The Shilluk-Luo of Bahr-el-Ghazal, closely related to the Shilluk, dealt with the death of their kings in a very similar way to the Shilluk. See Santandrea and de Georgi (1965: 14–16).
10. The current king of Tirangore who took office in 2008 was abducted from his office in Juba..
11. For a presentation of the ritual career of the *monyomiji* kings, read “‘Catching Life in the Spell of Death’: The Ritualisation of the King’s Victimhood”, (Simonse 1992 and 2017, Chapter 18).
12. Personal communication with Eisei Kurimoto.

13. On Nilotic digestive symbolism, see Simonse (1994).

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# *African Political Systems Revisited*

Changing Perspectives on Statehood and Power

Edited by Aleksandar Bošković and Günther Schlee



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EDITED BY  
ALEKSANDAR BOŠKOVIĆ  
AND GÜNTHER SCHLEE

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AND POWER