

In anthropology as much as in popular imagination, kings are figures of fascination and intrigue, heroes or tyrants in ways presidents and prime ministers can never be. This collection of essays by two of the world's most distinguished anthropologists—David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins—explores what kingship actually is, historically and anthropologically. As they show, kings are symbols for more than just sovereignty: indeed, the study of kingship offers a unique window into fundamental dilemmas concerning the very nature of power, meaning, and the human condition.

Reflecting on issues such as temporality, alterity, and utopia—not to mention the divine, the strange, the numinous, and the bestial—Graeber and Sahlins explore the role of kings as they have existed around the world, from the BaKongo to the Aztec to the Shilluk and beyond. Richly delivered with the wit and sharp analysis characteristic of Graeber and Sahlins, this book opens up new avenues for the anthropological study of this fascinating and ubiquitous political figure.

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If you deem that anthropology is neither a form of pompous navel-gazing, nor an exercise in making preposterous generalizations out of sketchy personal experiences, this book is for you. With impeccable scholarship, conceptual imagination, and wit, David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins think anew, and within a broad comparative scope, an ancient and illustrious question: why and how can a single man come to rule over the many as the embodiment or the delegate of a god? Such a question, they show, can only be answered by shifting towards an analysis where human, non-human, and meta-human persons are treated on the same ontological level as parts of a hierarchical cosmic polity. A golden spike in the coffin of eurocentrism, sociocentrism and anthropocentrism!

Philippe Descola (Collège de France), author of *Beyond nature and culture*

The wealth and volume of the ethnographic data analyzed in this book is dizzying. The authors allow us to venture along a variety of paths, ranging from the well-established kingdoms of Africa and Asia to the apparently egalitarian societies of Papua New Guinea and the Americas, revealing the astonishing dispersal of the “stranger king” model. The

authors' decisive step was to reject, on a strictly ethnographic basis, the commonplace analytic division made between cosmology and politics. It is in the ritual sphere, where spirits of diverse kinds meet with humans, that the diverse forms of state originate. A relationship that shows spiritual life, even in societies marked by egalitarianism, to be a domain impregnated with the same relations of hierarchy, control and subjection that characterize the kingdoms of this world. A work that will make history for sure.

Aparecida Vilaça (Museu Nacional/Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro), author of *Praying and preying: Christianity in indigenous Amazonia*

Two of the world's leading anthropologists combine their "complementary observations" to offer the most productively disruptive work on kingship since Hocart. The lost world they exhume is a continual affront to contemporary theory: a world where superstructure determines base and sociology recapitulates cosmology (kings are gods imitating men, not the reverse); where connection, competition, and imitation (of galactic hegemony, for example) are the reality and the monadic society a fiction. At the same time, their paleohistory of sovereignty points the way toward a deeper understanding of our contemporary moment, where sovereignty has become "popular" and we are ruled by kleptocrats and buffoon kings.

Sheldon Pollock (Columbia University), author of *The language of the gods in the world of men*

Graeber and Sahlins' *On kings*—a dialogue, not a union—takes Divine Kingship from its burial ground in the classics and puts it deep into enduring concerns about the brutality of political processes over the long haul of human history, ancient and current in ever new forms. In case studies of sovereign rulers conceived as gods, demons, nurslings, ancestral guests, and populist heroes—ultimate strangers—Graeber and Sahlins invite us to reconsider the nature of tyranny from inside the tiger's many mouths and to ask how we might, for once, refuse the king his long customary seat at the table.

Gillian Feeley-Harnik (University of Michigan), author of *The Lord's table: The meaning of food in early Judaism and Christianity*

# ON KINGS



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# ON KINGS

*David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins*



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# Table of Contents

<i>Analytical table of contents</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
INTRODUCTION	1
<i>David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins</i>	
CHAPTER 1	
The original political society	23
<i>Marshall Sahlins</i>	
CHAPTER 2	
The divine kingship of the Shilluk: On violence, utopia, and the human condition	65
<i>David Graeber</i>	
CHAPTER 3	
The atemporal dimensions of history: In the old Kongo kingdom, for example	139
<i>Marshall Sahlins</i>	
CHAPTER 4	
The stranger-kingship of the Mexica	223
<i>Marshall Sahlins</i>	

## CHAPTER 5

The people as nursemaids of the king: Notes on monarchs  
as children, women's uprisings, and the return of the ancestral  
dead in central Madagascar 249

*David Graeber*

## CHAPTER 6

The cultural politics of core–periphery relations 345

*Marshall Sahlins*

## CHAPTER 7

Notes on the politics of divine kingship: Or, elements for an  
archaeology of sovereignty 377

*David Graeber*

*Bibliography* 465

*Index* 515



## Analytical table of contents

INTRODUCTION (*Pp. 1–22*). Structures (*Pp. 1–7*) – Kingship in general (*Pp. 1–2*) – The cosmic polity (*Pp. 2–4*) – Stranger-king formations (*Pp. 5–7*) – Kingship politics (*Pp. 7–14*) – In general (*Pp. 7–12*) – Core-periphery relations (galactic polities) (*Pp. 13–14*) – The political economics of traditional kingship (*Pp. 15–16*) – On shopworn concepts that have outlived their usefulness (*Pp. 16–22*) – Shopworn economic concepts (*Pp. 18–19*) – Shopworn concepts of sociocultural order (*Pp. 19–22*).

**CH. 1 THE ORIGINAL POLITICAL SOCIETY** (*Pp. 23–64*). For example: Chewong and Inuit (*Pp. 25–35*) – Why call them spirits? (*Pp. 35–40*) – Social relations of people and metaperson-others (*Pp. 40–42*) – Metaperson powers-that-be (*Pp. 42–45*) – The cosmic polity (*Pp. 46–51*) – Determination by the religious basis (*Pp. 51–57*) – To conclude (*Pp. 57–62*) – Coda (*Pp. 62–64*).

**CH. 2 THE DIVINE KINGSHIP OF THE SHILLUK: ON VIOLENCE, UTOPIA, AND THE HUMAN CONDITION** (*Pp. 65–138*). Theories of divine kingship (*Pp. 67–82*) – The Shilluk as seen from Equatoria (*Pp. 68–81*) – Three propositions (*Pp. 81–82*) – A brief outline of Shilluk history (*Pp. 82–89*) – Mytho-history (*Pp. 89–101*) – A word on Nilotic cosmologies (*Pp. 89–92*) – The legend of Nyikang (*Pp. 92–100*) – Return to Fashoda (*Pp. 102–107*) – The installation ritual: Description (*Pp. 107–116*) – The

installation ritual: Analysis (*Pp. 116–127*) – Some words in way of a conclusion (*Pp. 127–138*).

**CH. 3 THE ATEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF HISTORY: IN THE OLD KONGO KINGDOM, FOR EXAMPLE** (*Pp. 139–221*). Introduction: Paradigmatic histories (*Pp. 139–144*) – African stranger-kingdoms (*Pp. 144–152*) – On the way to the kingdom (*Pp. 152–160*) – Advent of the stranger-king (*Pp. 160–169*) – Naturalizing the stranger-king (*Pp. 169–175*) – On crossing the river and marrying the land (*Pp. 175–187*) – The dual society (*Pp. 187–196*) – Serial stranger-kingship (*Pp. 196–200*) – Origins of the Kongo kingdom (*Pp. 20–210*) – Historiography (the end) (*Pp. 210–221*).

**CH. 4 THE STRANGER-KINGSHIP OF THE MEXICA** (*Pp. 223–248*). Stranger kings, galactic polities (*Pp. 227–237*) – Chichimeca and Tolteca (*Pp. 238–248*).

**CH. 5 THE PEOPLE AS NURSEMAIDS OF THE KING: NOTES ON MONARCHS AS CHILDREN, WOMEN'S UPRISINGS, AND THE RETURN OF THE ANCESTRAL DEAD IN CENTRAL MADAGASCAR** (*Pp. 249–343*). Introduction: Leiloza and the prophet of Valalafotsy (*Pp. 252–265*) – Leiloza, the last prince of Imamo (*Pp. 252–260*) – The real Leiloza and the bandit queen (*Pp. 260–265*) – Emblematic labor and the king as child (*Pp. 265–298*) – On ritual labor (*Pp. 268–274*) – Speaking, carrying, and making (*Pp. 274–279*) – Royal service as principle of government (*Pp. 280–285*) – Reversals: The king as child (*Pp. 285–290*) – Reflections on the king as toddler (*Pp. 290–294*) – The ritual system seen from the perspective of the child-king (*Pp. 294–297*) – Popular contestation, women's rebellions, and the return of the ancestral dead (*Pp. 298–343*) – Case 1: Andrianamboatsimarofy, an unstable king (*Pp. 301–308*) – Case 2: Radama I and the first women's uprising (*Pp. 308–315*) – Case 3: Ranavalona I, the toddler queen and the return of the dead (*Pp. 315–325*) – Case 4: Radama II and the second women's rebellion (*Pp. 325–335*) – Conclusions (*Pp. 335–343*).

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**CH. 6 THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF CORE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS** (*Pp.* 345–376). The anthropology of core-periphery relations (*Pp.* 350–358) – Cultural dynamics of galactic polities (*Pp.* 358–365) – Galactic mimesis: Uneven development in core-periphery systems (*Pp.* 365–376).

**CH. 7 NOTES ON THE POLITICS OF DIVINE KINGSHIP: OR, ELEMENTS FOR AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF SOVEREIGNTY** (*Pp.* 377–464). Sovereignty contained in time and space (*Pp.* 380–398) – The divine kingship of the Natchez (*Pp.* 390–398) – On the constitutive war between king and people (*Pp.* 398–464) – When kings lose: The tyranny of abstraction (*Pp.* 403–419) – When kings win: The war against the dead (*Pp.* 420–437) – Killing or exiling the dead (*Pp.* 437–440) – Becoming the dead (*Pp.* 440–442) – Outdoing the dead (*Pp.* 442–446) – Reversing the direction of history (*Pp.* 446–452) – Conclusions (*Pp.* 456–464).