

## INTRODUCTION

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# Theses on kingship

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## STRUCTURES

### *Kingship in general*

Kingship is one of the most enduring forms of human governance. While we cannot know its precise historical origins in time and space, it is attested during virtually all eras on all continents, and for most of human history the tendency was for it to become more common, not less.

What's more, once established, kings appear remarkably difficult to get rid of. It took extraordinary legal acrobatics to be able to execute Charles I and Louis XVI; simply killing a royal family, as with the tsars, leaves one (apparently forever) burdened with substitute tsars; and even today, it seems no coincidence the only regimes almost completely untroubled by the Arab Spring revolts of 2011 were those with longstanding monarchies. Even when kings are deposed, the legal and political framework of monarchy tends to live on, as evidenced in the fact that all modern states are founded on the curious and contradictory principle of "popular sovereignty," that the power once held by kings still exists, just now displaced onto an entity called "the people."

One unanticipated side-effect of the collapse of European colonial empires has been that this notion of sovereignty has become the basis of constitutional orders everywhere—the only partial exceptions being a few places, like Nepal or Saudi Arabia, which had monarchies of their own already.

It follows that any theory of political life that does not take account of this, or that treats kingship as some sort of marginal, exceptional, or secondary phenomenon, is not a very good theory.

In this volume, then, we propose some elements for a theory of kingship. The arguments set out from territory we have both explored already: in the one case, in the classic essays on the stranger-king; in the other, in the divine kingship of the Shilluk. The collection focuses particularly on what has been called “divine” or “sacred” kingship, but with the understanding that a thorough examination of its common features can reveal the deep structures underlying monarchy, and hence politics, everywhere.

What follows are a series of general propositions inspired by the findings of the essays collected in this book. Certain entries, perhaps, lean more toward the perspective of one author than the other, but we believe the dialogic tension to be fertile, and that the resulting propositions may suggest important new directions for research.

### *The cosmic polity*

Human societies are hierarchically encompassed—typically above, below, and on earth—in a cosmic polity populated by beings of human attributes and metahuman powers who govern the people’s fate. In the form of gods, ancestors, ghosts, demons, species-masters, and the animistic beings embodied in the creatures and features of nature, these metapersons are endowed with far-reaching powers of human life and death, which, together with their control of the conditions of the cosmos, make them the all-round arbiters of human welfare and illfare. Even many loosely structured hunting and gathering peoples are thus subordinated to beings on the order of gods ruling over great territorial domains and the whole of the human population. There are kingly beings in heaven even where there are no chiefs on earth.

It follows that the state of nature has the nature of the state. Given the governance of human society by metaperson authorities with ultimate life-and-death powers, something quite like the state is a universal human condition.

It also follows that kings are imitations of gods rather than gods of kings—the conventional supposition that divinity is a reflex of society notwithstanding. In the course of human history, royal power has been derivative of and dependent on divine power. Indeed, no less in stateless societies than in major kingdoms, the human authorities emulate the ruling cosmic powers—if in a reduced form. Shamans have the miraculous powers of spirits, with whom, moreover, they interact. Initiated elders or clan leaders act the god, perhaps in masked form, in presiding over human and natural growth. Chiefs are greeted and treated in the same ways as gods. Kings control nature itself. What usually passes for the divinization of human rulers is better described historically as the humanization of the god.

As a corollary, there are no secular authorities: human power is spiritual power—however pragmatically it is achieved. Authority over others may be acquired by superior force, inherited office, material generosity, or other means; but the power to do or be so is itself deemed that of ancestors, gods, or other external metapersons who are the sources of human vitality and mortality. In this cultural framework, a privileged relation to the metapersonal rulers of the human fate is the *raison d'être* of earthly social power. Moreover, as demonstrated in worldly accomplishments, this access to metahuman powers may have subjugation effects on people beyond those directly affected by the acts of the persons of authority. It's "charisma"—in the original, god-infused sense.

In this god-infused sense, Shilluk say the king is Juok (the god), but Juok is not the king. The divinity of the king is a kind of intersubjective animism. As a modality of the One over Many, divinity itself can be understood as the personified head of a class of things that are thus so many instances/instantiations of the godhead—which is also to say that as a partible person, the god is immanent in the creatures and features of his or her realm. Hawaiians speak of symbolically relevant plants, animals, and persons as so many "bodies" (*kino lau*) of the god: in which sense Captain Cook was famously the god Lono, but Lono was not Captain Cook. Such intersubjective animism is not all that rare: shamans are possessed by their familiars and victims by their witches. Idolatry and kinship are likewise forms of a broad metaphysics of intersubjective being.

Compared with the kind of cosmic polities that exist among foragers and many others, mortal kingship represents a limit on state power. There is simply no way that any mortal human, whatever his pretensions, whatever the social apparatus at his disposal could ever really wield as much power as a god. And most kings, despite the absolute nature of their claims, never seriously make the attempt.

For half of humanity, though, the creation of mortal kingship represents a major blow: because kings are, in virtually every known case, archetypically male. Nowadays, scholars are used to writing off Paleolithic or Neolithic representations of powerful female figures as mere “mythological” representations, of no political significance, but in the cosmic polities which then existed, this could not have been the case. If so, fixing divine political power in the male head of a royal household was a blow for patriarchy in two ways: not only was the primary human manifestation of divine power now masculine, but the main purpose of the ideal household is producing powerful men.

The precise historical trajectory by which divine powers—sovereignty properly speaking—devolved from metahuman beings to actual human beings, if it can ever be reconstructed, will be likely to take many unexpected turns. For instance: we know of societies (in aboriginal California, or Tierra del Fuego) where arbitrary orders are given only during rituals in which human beings impersonate gods, but those who give the orders are not the gods, but clowns, who appear to represent divine power in its essence; in related societies (e.g., the Kwakiutl), this develops into clown-police who hold sway during an entire ritual season; then, in yet others, into more straightforward seasonal police. In such cases, sovereignty is contained in time: outside the specific ritual or seasonal context, decentralization ensues, and those vested with sovereign powers during the ritual season are no different from, and have no more say than, anybody else. Sacred kingship, in contrast, would appear to be largely a means of containing sovereign power in space. The king, it is almost always asserted, has total power over the lives and possessions of his subjects; but only when he is physically present. As a result, an endless variety of strategies are employed to limit the king’s freedom of motion. Yet there is at the same time a mutually constitutive relation between the king’s containment and his power: the very taboos that constrain him are also what render him a transcendent metabeing.

*Stranger-king formations*

Stranger-kingdoms are the dominant form of premodern state the world around, perhaps the original form. The kings who rule them are foreign by ancestry and identity. The dynasty typically originates with a heroic prince from a greater outside realm: near or distant, legendary or contemporary, celestial or terrestrial. Alternatively, native rulers assume the identity and sovereignty of exalted kings from elsewhere and thus become foreigners—as in the Indic kingdoms of Southeast Asia—rather than foreigners becoming native rulers. The polity is in any case dual: divided between rulers who are foreign by nature—perpetually so, as a necessary condition of their authority—and the underlying autochthonous people, who are the “owners” of the country. The dual constitution is constantly reproduced in narrative and ritual, even as it is continuously enacted in the differential functions, talents, and powers of the ruling aristocracy and the native people.

The kingdom is neither an endogenous formation nor does it develop in isolation: it is a function of the relationships of a hierarchically ordered, intersocietal historical field. The superiority of the ruling aristocracy was not engendered by the process of state formation so much as the state was engendered by the a priori superiority of an aristocracy from elsewhere—endowed by nature with a certain *libido dominandi*. The ruling class precedes and makes a subject class.

On his way to the kingdom, the dynastic founder is notorious for exploits of incest, fratricide, patricide, or other crimes against kinship and common morality; he may also be famous for defeating dangerous natural or human foes. The hero manifests a nature above, beyond, and greater than the people he is destined to rule—hence his power to do so. However inhibited or sublimated in the established kingdom, the monstrous and violent nature of the king remains an essential condition of his sovereignty. Indeed, as a sign of the metahuman sources of royal power, force, notably as demonstrated in victory, can function politically as a positive means of attraction as well as a physical means of domination.

For all the transgressive violence of the founder, however, his kingdom is often peacefully established. Conquest is overrated as the source of “state formation.” Given their own circumstances—including the internal and external conflicts of the historical field—the indigenous people often have their own reasons for demanding a “king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles”

(1 Samuel 8:20). Even in the case of major kingdoms, such as Benin or the Mexica, the initiative may indeed come from the indigenous people, who solicit a prince from a powerful outside realm. Some of what passes for “conquest” in tradition or the scholarly literature consists of usurpation of the previous regime rather than violence against the native population.

While there is frequently no tradition of conquest, there is invariably a tradition of contract: notably in the form of a marriage between the stranger-prince and a marked woman of the indigenous people—most often, a daughter of the native leader. Sovereignty is embodied and transmitted in the native woman, who constitutes the bond between the foreign intruders and the local people. The offspring of the original union—often celebrated as the traditional founder-hero of the dynasty—thereby combines and encompasses in his own person the essential native and foreign components of the kingdom. Father of the country in one respect, as witness also his polygynous and sexual accomplishments, the king is in another the child-chief of the indigenous people, who comprise his maternal ancestry.

Even where there is conquest, by virtue of the original contract it is reciprocal: the mutual encompassment of the autochthonous people by the stranger-king and of the king by the autochthonous people. The installation rites of the king typically recreate the domestication of the unruly stranger: he dies, is reborn, and nurtured and brought to maturity at the hands of native leaders. His wild or violent nature is not so much eliminated as it is sublimated and in principle used for the general benefit: internally as the sanction of justice and order, and externally in the defense of the realm against natural and human enemies. But even as the king is domesticated, the people are civilized. The kingship is a civilizing mission. The advent of the stranger-king is often said to raise the native people from a rudimentary state by bringing them such things as agriculture, cattle, tools and weapons, metals—even fire and cooking, thus a transformation from nature to culture (in the Lévi-Straussian sense). As has been said of African societies, it is not civilized to be without a king.

As allegorized in the original union, the synthesis of the foreign and autochthonous powers—male and female, celestial and terrestrial, violent and peaceful, mobile and rooted, stranger and native, etc.—establishes a cosmic system of social viability. In a common configuration, the autochthonous people’s access

to the spiritual sources of the earth's fertility is potentiated by king's conveyance of fecundating forces, such as the rain and sun that make the earth bear fruit. Each incomplete in themselves, the native people and foreign rulers together make a viable totality—which is what helps the kingdom to endure, whatever the tensions of their ethnic-cum-class differences.

Although they have surrendered the rule to the foreign king, the native people retain a certain residual sovereignty. By virtue of their unique relation to the powers of the earth, the descendants of the erstwhile native rulers are the chief priests of the new regime. Their control of the succession of the king, including the royal installation rituals, is the warrant of the foreign-derived ruler's legitimacy. In the same vein, the native leaders characteristically have temporal powers as councilors of the stranger-king, sometimes providing his so-called "prime minister." To a significant extent, the principle that the sovereignty of the king is delegated by the people, to whom it belongs by origin and by right, is embedded in stranger-king formations, hence widely known before and apart from its early modern European expressions.

Notwithstanding the superiority and perpetual foreign ethnicity of the ruling aristocracy, they are often not dominant linguistically or culturally, but are assimilated in these respects by the indigenous population. Correlatively, the identity of the kingdom is usually that of the native people.

European colonization is often in significant aspects a late historical form of indigenous stranger-kingship traditions: Captain Cook, Rajah Brooke, and Hernando Cortés, for example.

## KINGSHIP POLITICS

### *In general*

Political struggle over the power of the king generally takes the form of a battle between two principles: divine kingship and sacred kingship. In practice, divine kingship is the essence of sovereignty: it is the ability to act as if one were a god; to step outside the confines of the human, and return to rain favor, or destruction, with arbitrariness and impunity. Such power may be accompanied by the theory that the king by doing so demonstrates he is an actual embodiment of

some already-existing metahuman being. But it may not be; it could as easily be that by acting in this way, the king himself becomes a metahuman being. Japanese shoguns (a few anyway), Roman emperors, or Ganda *kabaka* could all become gods in their own right. To be “sacred,” in contrast, is to be set apart, hedged about by customs and taboos; the restrictions surrounding sacralized kings—“not to touch the earth, not to see the sun” in Frazer’s famous dictum—are ways not only of recognizing the presence of unaccountable divine power, but also, crucially, of confining, controlling, and limiting it. One could see these two principles as refractions of different moments of the stranger-king narrative: the first, of the terrible power of the king on his arrival; the second, his encompassment and defeat by his subjects. But in this larger sense, both are always present simultaneously.

All the classic issues of divine kingship, then—the royal displays of arbitrary power, the king as scapegoat, regicide (by duel or sacrifice), the use of royal effigies, the oracular role of dead monarchs—can best be understood as different moves in a continual chess game played between king and people, in which the king and his partisans attempt to increase the divinity of the king, and the popular factions attempt to increase his sacralization. Stranger-kingship provides the deep structural foundations for a vernacular politics in which representatives of humanity (often literally) did battle with their gods, and sometimes prevailed.

The chief weapon in the hands of those who oppose the expansion of royal power might be termed “adverse sacralization”—to recognize the metahuman status of the monarch, to “keep the king divine” (Richards 1968), requires an elaborate apparatus which renders him, effectively, an abstraction, by hiding, containing, or effacing those aspects of his being that are seen as embodying his mortal nature. Kings become invisible, immaterial, sealed off from contact with their subjects or with the stuff and substance of the world—and hence, often, confined to their palaces, unable to exercise arbitrary power (or often any power) in any effective way.

Royal regicide is just the ultimate form of adverse sacralization.

When popular forces win, the result can thus take the form of Frazerian sacred kingship, or the reduction of the monarch to ceremonial figurehead, like the latter-day Zhou emperor or present-day queen of England.



When kings definitively win (e.g., by allying with a newly emerging civil or military bureaucracy), a different range of conflicts ensue, largely, between the living and the dead. Having overcome boundaries in space, kings will regularly attempt to similarly overcome boundaries in time, and translate their metahuman status into some form of genuine immortality. Insofar as they are successful, they create a series of dilemmas for their successors, whose legitimacy is derived from their ancestry, but who at the same time are necessarily placed in a position of rivalry with them.

Anthropologists have long remarked on the phenomenon of sinking status. Over time, the progressive distancing of cadet persons and branches from the main line of succession is an endemic source of strife in royal lineages, often leading to fratricidal violence—especially among paternal half-siblings, each backed by their own maternal kinsmen (cf. Geertz and Geertz 1975). The succession chances of the junior princes of each generation become increasingly remote, unless they seize by force and guile the kingship to which they have diminishing claim by right. Beside the violence of an interregnum, the effect is often a centrifugal dispersion of royals—those who withdraw or are defeated—into the outer reaches of the kingdom or even beyond, where they may take power in a lesser realm of their own. This is a major source of stranger-king formation and of regional configurations of core-periphery relations (galactic polities). It may also play a role in the formation of so-called “empires.”

This problem is complicated even further by a central contradiction between two forms of sinking status: horizontal and vertical. On the one hand, each collateral line that breaks off from the dynastic core descends ever lower in status as new ones are constantly produced, unless some radical means of self-promotion succeed in at least temporarily reversing their decline. On the other hand, the central line itself is usually seen as declining steadily in status, as the current ruler becomes ever more distant from the founding hero, god, or stranger-king. As a result, the branch of the royal line identified with the highest-ranking ancestor (the oldest) is also the lowest-ranking branch of the royal line.

The inevitability of sinking status over time leads to the dilemma of how to manage the royal dead. Deceased members of the dynasty are likely to be present in political life through shrines, mummies, relics, tombs, or even palaces; to communicate their will and perspectives through mediums, oracles, or similar

means. The paradox of horizontal and vertical sinking status—that older ancestors rank higher for the same reason their descendants rank lower—becomes all the more acute the more active the role of the dead in contemporary politics becomes. This role can be very active indeed: Inca royal mummies continued to own the same palace, lands, and retinues of retainers they had possessed in life, forcing each new ruler to conquer new territories to support his own court. In all such systems, if things were left to their own devices for too long, living kings would be crowded out and overwhelmed by legions of the dead. So the dead had to be controlled, limited, contained—even purged. Like living kings, they had to be rendered more sacred, more bounded by restrictions that were restrictive of their power—even if those restrictions were ultimately constitutive of that power.

It is a general sociological principle that the more ancestors are seen as fundamentally different sorts of being from present-day mortals, the more they are likely to be seen as a source of power; the more similar, the more they are seen as rivals and sources of constraint. The memory of a totemic killer whale ancestor, or witchetty grub, is in no sense an imposition on the living; by contrast, the memory of a man remembered and venerated by his many descendants is very much a rival for any descendant whose life project is to achieve exactly the same thing. Only so many ancestors can become famous. Still, there is always a balance here: if ancestors are entirely effaced, their descendants lose all status; if they have too much power, they are seen as stifling those same descendants' self-realization. The result is often another variant of the politics of ritual subterfuge so typical of dealing with life-giving gods: they must be contained, driven off, or even destroyed, all in the ostensible name of honoring them.

Ordinary mortals may or may not face this problem (it all depends on how they see themselves in time and history), but kings, whose legitimacy is based at least in part on descent from other kings, must always face it. To flee one's domain and become a stranger-king elsewhere is in fact one way to escape the chokehold of the dead, but a stranger king's descendants will begin to have the same problem, and it will only get worse as time goes on.

Much of the more extravagant behavior of the rulers of powerful kingdoms or "early states" can be seen as attempts to escape this chokehold, that is, as modes of competition with the dead. One might attempt to efface the dead, or become

the dead, but this is rarely entirely effective. One might enter into direct competition in the creation of timeless monuments, in conquest, or in the ritual sacrifice of ever greater numbers of subjects in attempts to manifest ever greater arbitrary sovereign power. One might even—this is sometimes done—attempt to reverse the direction of history entirely, and invent a myth of progress. All of these expedients create new problems.

The ordinary balance of power between king and people is often maintained through intense emotional engagements: love, hatred, or some combination of the two. These often take the form of paradoxical inversions of what would normally be expected to be the result of those emotions: Shilluk or Swazi kings took on divine status at the moment people united in hatred against them; the nurturant love of Merina toward infantilized rulers might alternate between indulgence for acts that might otherwise be seen as atrocities, and harsh chastisement when they were seen as overstepping bounds.

The perfection of the king, his court, palace, capital, or immediate surroundings, is not precisely a model of the universe; it is a model of the universe restored to a state of abstract Platonic perfection, one which it lacks in ordinary experience. Perhaps it once had this state. Perhaps it is felt it someday will again. The newly founded royal city, a projection of a single human vision imposed on the material world, can thus be seen as the prototype for all future utopias: an attempt to impose an image of perfection not just onto the physical world but also into the lives of those mortal humans who actually lived in it. Ultimately, of course, this is impossible. Humans cannot be reduced to Platonic ideals, and the fundamental quandaries of human life, revolving as they do particularly around reproduction and death, cannot be legislated away; such states of transcendent perfection can perhaps be attained in moments of ritual performance, but no one can live in such a moment for their entire life, or even any substantial part of it. Some royal capitals try to exclude birth, infirmity, and (natural) death from the royal settlement entirely. Going that far is unusual. But something along these lines always happens. At the very least, royal courts will be marked by elaborate codes of etiquette which require that even everyday social interaction be governed by the pretense that such things do not exist. These codes set standards of comportment that are then realized at ever greater degrees of imperfection the further one travels (socially or physically) from the royal court.

In this way, where prophets foretell the total future resolution of the contradictions and dilemmas of the human condition, kings embody their partial present-day resolution.

The arbitrariness of stranger-kings is, however paradoxically, the key to their ability to establish themselves as avatars of justice. The ability to seize or destroy anything, even if only very occasionally deployed, is structurally similar to the ownership of everything; it is an undifferentiated relation between the monarch and everyone and everything else. This indifference is also impartiality, since such an absolute monarch has—in principle at least—no particular interest which might bias his judgment in disputes between his subjects. They are all the same to him. For this reason, kings will always claim some kind of absolute despotic power, even if everyone is aware such claims mean next to nothing in practice—since otherwise, they would not be kings. At the same time, the all-encompassing nature of such claims renders the very power of the king potentially subversive of existing social arrangements. While kings will, generally, represent themselves as embodiments and bastions of all existing hierarchies and structures of authority (e.g., by insisting that he is “Father of his People,” the monarch above all confirms the authority of actual fathers over their wives, children, and dependents), the ultimately undifferentiated nature of their power also meant all subjects were, ultimately, the same—that is, equal. As the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Henry Home (Lord Kames) was perhaps first to point out, the difference between absolute despotism, where all are equal except for one man, and absolute democracy, is simply one man. There is thus a deep structural affinity between the contemporary notion that all citizens are “equal before the law” and the monarchical principle that they are equal as potential victims of purely arbitrary royal depredation.

In political life, this tension can take many forms. Commoners may appeal to the king against his “evil councilors.” Kings or emperors may frame themselves as popular champions against the interests of the aristocracy. Alternately, everyone, regardless of status, can unify against the king.

As a result, even when kings are gone—even when they are deposed by popular uprisings—they are likely to linger in ghostly form, precisely as such a unifying principle. Royal spirit mediumship in much of Africa and Madagascar, and the modern notion of “popular sovereignty,” are both contemporary examples of this principle.

*Core–periphery relations (galactic polities)*

Centrifugal dissemination of influential political, ritual, and material forms from central kingdoms often evokes a centripetal attraction and movement of peoples from the hinterlands. Peripheral societies have been rendered subordinate culturally while still independent politically. It is probably a law of political science that all great kingdoms were marginal once. Originally oriented to a powerful center from the peripheries, they succeed by some advantage—as in trade or warfare—in replacing their erstwhile superiors.

Indeed, in these core–periphery configurations centered on dominant kingdoms, there are endemic impulses of “upward nobility” at every level of the intersocietal hierarchy. The apical kingdoms themselves are competitively counterposed in a larger geopolitical field, which they seek to dominate by universalizing their own claims to power. On one hand, they engage in what is variously described in these pages as “utopian politics” or “the real-politics of the marvelous” by tracing their origins to world-historical heroes (such as Alexander the Great), legendary god-kings (such as Quetzalcoatl), fabled cities (such as Troy or Mecca), ancient or contemporary world powers (such as the Roman or Chinese empires), and/or great gods (such as Shiva). On the other hand, they demonstrate their universality by acquiring—through tribute, trade, or pillage—and domesticating the wild, animistic powers ensouled in the exotic objects of the barbaric hinterlands.

In a famous ethnographic case reported by Edmund Leach (1954), chiefs of the Kachin hill tribe of Burma have been known to “become Shan”: that is, to ally with and adopt the lifestyle of Shan princes. For their part, Shan princes take on the political and ritual trappings of Burmese or Chinese kings—some of which may also filter up to the hill peoples. This phenomenon of “galactic mimesis,” in which lesser chiefs assume the political forms of their proximate superiors, is a prevalent dynamic of core–periphery systems, impelled by competition within and between political entities throughout the intersocietal hierarchy. The competition takes one of two common forms. In a process of “complementary schismogenesis,” individuals contending for leadership in a given community, or communities competing for power within a larger galactic field, attempt to trump their local adversaries by affiliating with a superior chief; they scale up their own status to a higher register of the regional hierarchy. Or conversely, in a process of “antagonistic acculturation,” a lesser group may attempt to resist the

encroachment of a neighboring power by adopting the latter's own political apparatus and thus effect a stand-off—the way the Vietnamese long claimed their own mandate of heaven as a “southern empire” on equal basis with the Chinese “northern empire.” Note that in any case the elements of high political status, including kingship, are disseminated by a mimetic process through the region and on the initiative of the less powerful peoples.

Taken together with acculturative influences radiating outward from core kingdoms, galactic mimesis has the effect of creating hybrid societies whose political and cosmological forms are largely not of their own devising and indeed surpass any possible “determination by the economic basis.” Given the pervasiveness of core–periphery relations the world around, even in parts of the “tribal zone,” this kind of hybridity or uneven development is more often the norm of sociocultural order than the exception. The “superstructure” exceeds the “infrastructure.”

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMICS OF TRADITIONAL KINGSHIP

Kingship proprietary schemes are complex. On one hand, the country is divided into local properties, of which the ancestors of the inhabitants, or the indigenous spirits with whom the ancestors have made a pact, are the “true owners”—and the decisive agents of the area's fertility. Correlatively, the local subject population, who have ritual access to these metaperson authorities through their initiated elders or priestly leaders, are themselves deemed the “owners,” the “earth,” the “land,” or some such designation of their founder rights to the country relative to the ruling aristocracy—especially in stranger-kingdoms, where the latter are foreign by origin and ethnic identity. Although possessory in relation to the rulers, the local people's rights are only usufructuary in relation to the spiritual inhabitants, whose ultimate ownership must be duly acknowledged by the current occupants. (Notice that these relations between the local people and the autochthonous spirits are themselves analogous to the larger structure of the stranger-kingdom.) On the other hand, the ruling aristocracy and the king—who by tradition may have been poor and landless originally except as they were granted land by the native people—may also be “owners”; but here in the sense of lordship over large landed estates and their inhabitants, giving them tributary rights to a portion of product and manpower generated by the underlying

population. Whereas the subject people's relation to the process is productive, by virtue of their control of the primary means, the rulers' relation to the process is extractive, by virtue of their domination of the producing people. As the East African Nyoro people put it: "The Mukama [the king] rules the people; the clans rule the land" (Beattie 1971: 167).

Accordingly, the kingdom economy has a dual structure, marked by fundamental differences between the *oikos* economics of the underlying population and the specifically political economics of the palace and aristocracy, undertaken with an eye toward the material subsidization of their power. Devoted rather to a customary livelihood, the primary sector is organized by the kinship and community relations of the subject people. The ruling class is principally concerned with the finished product of the people's work in goods and manpower, on which it takes a toll that helps fund an elite sphere of wealth accumulation, oriented particularly to the political finalities of strengthening and extending its sphere of domination. Labor in this sphere is organized by corvée, slave, and/or client relations. Beside support of an imposing palace establishment, it is notably employed in the accumulation of riches from extramural sources by means of raid, trade, and/or tribute. Employed, then, in conspicuous consumption, monumental construction, and strategic redistribution—and possibly in further military exploits—this wealth has subjugating effects, both directly, as benefiting some, and indirectly, as impressing others. Moreover, the material success of the king is the sign of his access to the divine sources of earthly prosperity, thereby doubling the political effects of his wealth by the demonstration of his godly powers.

Kingship is a political economy of social subjugation rather than material coercion. Kingly power does not work on proprietary control of the subject people's means of existence so much as on the beneficial or awe-inspiring effects of royal largess, display, and prosperity. The objective of the political economy is the increase in the number and loyalty of subjects—as distinct from capitalist enterprise, which aims at the increase of capital wealth. To paraphrase a Marxian formula, the essential project of kingship economics is  $P-W-P'$ —where the political command of people gives an accumulation of wealth that yields a greater command of people—by contrast to the classic capitalist formula,  $W-P-W'$ —where the proprietary control of productive wealth (capital) gives the control of people (labor) in the aim of increasing productive wealth.

One might justly say that “spirits own the means of production,” were it not that in the form of plants, animals, significant artifacts, and even land, and the natural forces of growth, these so-called “spirits,” and more properly called “metapersons,” *are* the means of production. Having their own dispositions and intentions, they are indeed *their own persons*, and, together with divinities, ancestors, and other such metaperson powers, they are known to be responsible for the success or failure of human work. Accordingly, the “means of production” characteristically includes ritual, especially sacrificial ritual, as an essential part of work—as in the famous Tikopian “work of the gods.”

It also follows that the political benefits of material success—the rewards in status and influence—go to the shamans, priests, elders, lineage heads, big-men, chiefs, or kings, who have by ascription or achievement priority of access to these metahuman sources of human prosperity—but not necessarily, or only to a lesser extent, to the hunters, gardeners, or others who did the work. The alienation of the worker from his product was a general condition long before its notoriety in capitalism. So far as the social credit goes instead to the reigning politicoreligious authorities, political power may thus have an “economic basis”—although the “economic basis” is not economic.

Also by the way, cannibalism is a widespread condition, even among many societies that profess to abhor it. Cannibalism is a predicament of the animistic hunter or gardener, who must live by consuming animals or plants which (who) are essentially persons themselves. Hence the taboos and other ritual respects accorded to these species and their metaperson masters—again as a necessary condition of “production.”

#### ON SHOPWORN CONCEPTS THAT HAVE OUTLIVED THEIR USEFULNESS

“Cultural relativism,” properly understood, has not outlived its usefulness. What is useless is the vulgar sense of relativism to the effect that the values of any society are as good as, if not better than, the values of any other, including our own. Properly understood, cultural relativism is an anthropological technique for understanding cultural differences, not a charitable way of granting moral absolutism. It consists of the provisional suspension of our own moral judgments or



valuations of other people's practices in order to place them as positional values in the cultural and historical contexts that gave rise to them. The issue is what these practices mean, how they came about, and what their effects are for the people concerned, not what they are or are worth in our terms.

In this same relativist regard, the local people's ontological scheme, their sense of what there is, must likewise be considered in itself and for itself, and not be distorted by analytic concepts that substitute our certainties of "reality" for theirs. Take the category of "myth," for example. In standard English, to label a statement as "myth" means it's not true. Hence in speaking of other people's "myths," we characteristically assert that what they know as sacred truth, and upon which they predicate their existence, is fictional and unbelievable—for us. Having thus debunked the constitutional basis of their society—as in the ethnological oxymoron "mythical charter"—we are given liberty to write it off as essentially unreal for them too: an epiphenomenal mystification of their actual sociopolitical practice. What is then typically left to the scientific project is a more or less feckless search for the "kernel of historical truth" in a narrative riven with irrelevant fantasy—in this way ignoring that the concepts thus devalued are the true history at issue. For taken in that veridical capacity by the people concerned, the so-called "myth" is truly organizing their historical action.

"Life, after all, is as much an imitation of art as the reverse." So commented Victor Turner (1957: 153) in regard to the way Central African Ndembu villagers applied principles from the traditions of Lunda kingship they had learned as children to their current social relations. Or again, this is how important political leaders likewise inform and structure their own public actions by the relations encoded in dynastic epics. The past is not simply prologue, but, as Turner says, it is "paradigm." Historical causes in the mode of traditions have no temporal or physical proximity to their effects: they are inserted into the situation, but they are not of it. Embedding the present in terms of a remembered past, this kind of culturally instituted temporality is a fundamental mode of history-making, from the omnipresent Dreamtime of Australian Aboriginals to the state politics of Kongo kings. But then, what actually happens in a given situation is always constituted by cultural significations that transcend the parameters of the happening itself: Bobby Thomson didn't simply hit the ball over the left-field fence, he won the pennant. The better part of history is atemporal and cultural: not "what actually happened," but what it is that happened.

This does not mean that just because Nuer now insist they are all descended from a man named “Nuer” who lived ten generations ago, we must ignore documentary evidence of the existence of Nuer before 1750. It does mean that if we do not care what being Nuer means to Nuer, then or now, we have no business speaking about “Nuer” at all.

*Shopworn economic concepts*

“Things,” for example. The Cartesian distinction of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, subjects and objects, is not a good description of ontological schemes largely constituted on grounds of human attributes or personhood. As already repeatedly noted, in the societies at issue in this work the features of the environment with which people are significantly engaged, and even important productive artifacts of their own making, have the inner and essential qualities of human persons. The conventional anthropological concept of “the psychic unity of humanity” has to be extended to the subjectively infused universe for many or most of these societies. It was a distinctive Judeo-Christian conceit that the world was made of nothing, that spirit or subjectivity was not immanent in it—and for Adam’s eating an apple humans would be condemned to wearing themselves to death working on obdurate matter, thorns, and thistles. For most of the world, economic praxis has necessarily entailed intersubjective relations with the beings on which (with whom) people work and which (who) decide the outcome. The plants that the Achuar women of Amazonia nurture are their children, even as the success of their efforts is due to the goddess of cultivation. Here it is not simply that human skills are a necessary but not sufficient cause of the successful outcome, but that human skills are the signs of divinely endowed powers. Our own parochial economic science of a Cartesian world notwithstanding, in this respect there are no simple “things:” the so-called “objects” of people’s interest have their own desires.

Likewise “production”: the notion of a heroic individual working creatively on inert matter, thereby transforming it into a useful existence by his own effort according to his own plan, does not describe an intersubjective praxis in which metaperson-alterers are the primary agents of the process (Descola 2013: 321ff.).

It is more accurate to say that people *receive* the fruits of their efforts from these sources than that they *create* them (e.g., Harrison 1990: 47ff.). The forces

that make gardens grow, animals available, women fertile, pots come out intact from the kiln and implements from the forge—forces variously hypostasized as *mana*, *semangat*, *basina*, *nawalak*, *orenda*, etc.—are not of human origin. Conventional notions of the supposed functional effects of the relations of production on the larger relations of society are nonstarters in regard to the many societies so ontologically constituted.

Our notion of “production” is itself the secularization of a theological concept, but it derives from a very specific theology, in which an all-powerful God creates the universe *ex nihilo* (Descola 2013: 321ff.)—an idea which is maintained in our cosmology in multiple ways even after God has been ostensibly taken out of the picture. But consider the hunter, forager, or fisher. Does she “produce” anything? At what point does a trapped fish or uprooted tuber stop being a “natural” phenomenon and start being a “social product”? We are speaking of acts of transformation, attack, propitiation, care, killing, disarticulation, and reshaping. But the same is ultimately true of making automobiles. It’s only if one imagines the factory as a black box, the way a man who doesn’t know very much about the full course of pregnancy might imagine a woman’s womb as “producing” (etymologically, “pushing out”) something fully formed through one great burst of “labor,” that it’s possible to say “production” is the true basis of human life.

#### *Shopworn concepts of sociocultural order*

As implied in the preceding discussion—and amplified in the body of this work—several conceptual dichotomies of broad application in the human sciences are not receivable for the societies under consideration here, inasmuch as these binaries are not substantially differentiated, opposed, or otherwise ontologically pertinent. Typically, they are inappropriate ethnocentric projections onto culturally distinct others. But the peoples concerned do not distinguish:

- “Humans” from “spirits.” So-called “spirits” (metapersons) have the essential qualities of persons.
- “Material” from “spiritual.” They are largely and fundamentally alike on the common ground of humanity.
- “Supernatural” from “natural.” Populated and activated by embodied persons, there is no subjectless “natural” world: a fortiori, no transcendent realm of “spirit.”

- Hence, “this world” from an “otherworld.” Metaperson-others are in people’s everyday—and in dreams, every night—experience. People are known to communicate with so-called “spirits” and have customary social relationships with them, including sex and marriage.

There are no egalitarian human societies. Even hunters are ordered and dominated by a host of metaperson powers-that-be, whose rule is punitively backed by severe sanctions. The earthly people are dependent and subordinate components of a cosmic polity. They well know and fear higher authority—and sometimes they defy it. Society both with and against the state is virtually a human universal.

This does not mean the famous egalitarian ethos of so many hunting societies, and not just them, is an illusion. Just as assertions of the absolute power of the sovereign are also, tacitly, assertions of the absolute equality of his subjects (at least in relation to him), so assertions of metahuman power are also ipso facto ways of asserting that mortal humans are—in all the most important ways—the same. The difference is that a flesh-and-blood Sun King needs an apparatus of rule (which almost invariably becomes the primary object of hatred of his subjects); if the actual sun is king, well, human beings are pretty much all equal compared to the sun. The first ideals of political equality— especially, the refusal to give and take orders between adults, so well documented among many societies with particularly terrifying cosmic powers—are themselves an effect of the cosmic polity such men and women inhabit. This no less makes them pioneers of human freedom.

Note the disproportions in structure and power between the cosmic polity governing the human community—including divine beings with ultimate life-and-death powers over the people—and the organization of the human society itself. In both morphology and potency there is no equivalence between the human social order and the cosmic authors of its fate. Great gods on whom human life depends are known to peoples in the Arctic, the New Guinea Highlands, and Amazonia: as was said earlier, there are kings in heaven where there are not even chiefs on earth. Neither do kings on earth have the hegemonic scope and powers of the gods they imitate. This structural disproportion is one reason (among others) that the common human science of the “supernatural realm”

as a discursive ideological reflex of the people's sociopolitical order, being designed to functionally support it whether by mystification or replication, is a theoretical practice as seriously flawed as it is habitually repeated. Durkheim notwithstanding.

Human societies of all kinds are never alone in another sense. Engaged in regional fields with societies of cultural others, they are largely formed in respect of one another. As noted above, even apart from imperial systems or galactic polities centered in dominant kingdoms, core-periphery relations are known in the "tribal zone"—as in the classic "culture areas" of the Native Americas, with their respective "cultural climaxes" (Kroeber 1947)—such that the structures and practices of any given society are predicated on those of other societies. Besides diffusion and acculturation by domination, a variety of other intercultural dynamics may be in play: including complementary schismogenesis, whereby interacting peoples take contrary cultural forms, whether in the mode of competition or interdependence; or the aforementioned galactic mimesis, whereby peripheral peoples take on the cosmopolitical forms of hierarchical superiors. The scandal is that while human societies are thus never alone, the human sciences have long pretended that they are. With few exceptions, such as recent world system and globalization theories, all our major paradigms of cultural order and change imagine that societies are self-fashioning monads—autonomous and *sui generis*. Durkheimian sociology is not the only one. Likewise, Malinowskian functionalism; the structural functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown; the Marxism of base and superstructure; evolutionism from Herbert Spencer to Leslie White and Julian Steward; Benedictian patterns of culture; even post-structuralist discourses and subjectivities: they all suppose that the forms and relations they are explicating are situated within a solitary sociocultural order and that the articulations and dynamics of that order are the critical matters at issue. The concept of culture has been unfortunately tied to a politics of nationalism since Johann Gottfried von Herder and his followers formulated it in that context.

And so, finally, we pass to that intellectual fetish whose worship today transcends even that of "the nation"—that is, its twin companion, "the state." Asking whether a kingdom is a state or not rarely tells you very much at all about its politics or constitution. Surely we have learned all there is to learn from the

endless theorizing on “the origins of the state” or “the process of state formation” that so dominated theoretical debates of the twentieth century. In retrospect, we may well discover that “the state” that consumed so much of our attention never existed at all, or was, at best, a fortuitous confluence of elements of entirely heterogeneous origins (sovereignty, administration, a competitive political field, etc.) that came together in certain times and places, but that, nowadays, are very much in the process of once again drifting apart.