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The Frazer Lecture 1948

E. E. Evans-Pritchard

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THE central theme of *The Golden Bough* was the divine kingship, and it has seemed to me appropriate that a lecture established in its author's honour and now dedicated to his memory should be on that subject. I propose, therefore, to examine one of the examples of divine kingship cited by Sir James Frazer, that of the Shilluk of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and to discuss it as a problem of social structure.

It was recorded as early as 1905 that it was a Shilluk custom to kill their kings¹ and much information about the Shilluk kingship in general has since been collected. Professor and Mrs Seligman studied the institution in 1909–10 and it was they who brought it to the notice of Sir James Frazer and into the main stream of ethnological theory. Apart from the writings of the Seligmans and a number of articles by other hands there are two monographs on the Shilluk, *The*

¹ Banholzer, P. and Giffen, J. K., *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (edited by Count Gleichen, 1905), ch. viii, p. 199.

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Shilluk People by Professor Diedrich Westermann, who conducted linguistic research among the Shilluk in 1910, and Father Wilhelm Hofmayr's *Die Schilluk*, largely based on the observations of Father Banholzer and other of his fellow Catholic missionaries, which date from the beginning of the century. Father Hofmayr himself worked among the Shilluk from 1906 to 1916. There has, indeed, long been a considerable body of knowledge about the Shilluk and I would not have considered it profitable to discuss the Shilluk kingship afresh were it not that new light has recently been shed on their social structure, and more particularly on the place of the kingship in it, by officers of the Sudan Political Service. It is significant that two of them studied anthropology before joining the Sudan Service, Mr P. P. Howell at Cambridge, from where he had carried out some research among the Shilluk before joining the Service, and Mr W. P. G. Thomson at Oxford. It is from this literature, and especially from the more recent accounts, that I have drawn the material for my lecture, for though the Shilluk live in a part of the world with which I am very familiar, my contact with them has been slight.

The Shilluk are the most northern of the Nilotic peoples and have been for centuries in contact

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with the Arab population of the northern Sudan. Their country was first subjected to intermittent taxation and raiding by the Turks about 1820 and was finally conquered by them in 1867 and became part of the Ottoman Empire. When the Turkish Administration succumbed to the Sudanese Mahdi the Shilluk were involved in a struggle against this new ruler and afterwards against his Khalifa. Lord Kitchener arrived in Shillukland at the end of 1898 and since that time the people have been under Anglo-Egyptian administration. I mention these political events because they have strongly influenced the Shilluk kingship for close on a century, during which the kings have been executed, exiled, deposed, and nominated, by foreign governments. The funerary rites of a dead king and the procedures of election and investiture of a new king were probably not performed in the full traditional manner during this period.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The hamlets of the Shilluk, who number about 110,000 souls, are almost continuous, like beads on a string, along the west bank of the Nile from near Lake No to about lat. 12 N. with a number of

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settlements on the east bank and along the lower reaches of the Sobat. Their country is treeless savannah but, unlike their cousins the Nuer and Dinka, they are predominantly agricultural and sedentary, for their long river frontage gives them adequate water and grazing in the dry season for the comparatively few cattle (about 25,000) they possess.¹ The brief account I give of their social structure is mostly derived from articles in *Sudan Notes and Records* by Mr Pumphrey and Mr Howell.²

The hamlets (*myer*, sing. *pac*), built from 100 yards to a mile or so apart on high ground parallel to the river, vary in size from one to fifty homesteads; a homestead (*gol*), the residence of a family (*gol*), consisting usually of two huts encircled by a fence. Each hamlet is occupied by members of an extended family, or small lineage, with their wives, and the homesteads of this group are arranged in a rough horseshoe shape around a common cattle-byre, which shelters the animals in the rains and is used as a club at all seasons, and a common kraal. The headman of a hamlet (*jal dwong pac*) who is also the head of a lineage in

¹ I am indebted to Mr John Donald of the Sudan Political Service for the most recent figures of human and bovine population.

² M. E. C. Pumphrey, 'The Shilluk Tribe', *S.N. and R.* (1941); P. P. Howell, 'The Shilluk Settlement', *ibid.* (1941).

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the settlement of which it forms part represents the hamlet on the council of the settlement and receives in consequence a robe of honour from the king or from the chief of the settlement. If his hamlet is only a subsidiary seat of a lineage in the settlement he is regarded merely as its senior member.

The settlement to which I have just referred is called *podh*, a word which has a number of meanings but generally designates a group of hamlets, occupied by different lineages, which, though there may be much competition between them, unite for defence, for the ritual of age-sets (an institution otherwise of little political importance), and in intersettlement and national affairs, and have a common chief. There are about a hundred of these settlements in Shillukland, each having a population of from less than 100 to more than 600 adult males. They are structurally distinct groups of a political kind though the distance that divides a settlement from adjacent settlements may be no greater than that which separates a hamlet from its nearest neighbours in the same settlement.

In every settlement there is a dominant lineage, the *dyil*, the owners of the soil, with whom the various stranger and immigrant accretions (*wedh*) identify themselves politically and with whom they

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form a separate social community with its own corporate life. This lineage is generally dominant in numbers as well as in virtue of the prestige derived from its traditional association with the settlement site. The chief of the settlement is chosen from it and by its members, though the stranger lineages have some say in the election, which must be confirmed by the king (*reth*) of the Shilluk. Even when a stranger lineage, sometimes a branch of the royal clan (*kwareth*), becomes more numerous in a settlement than its dominant lineage and dispossesses its members of the chieftainship they still retain some prestige as owners of the soil. Unity in a settlement and the authority of its chief are said to depend on its integration around a powerful dominant lineage. I must, therefore, say something here about Shilluk lineages.

There has been, and still is, some obscurity about Shilluk descent groups. There are said to be in Shillukland about 100 groups designated by the word *kwa* (descendants) followed by the name of the ancestor of the group. These are often described in the literature as exogamous clans but many of them might perhaps be better spoken of as lineages. They have a typical lineage structure with its characteristic branching off in response to the formation

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of new territorial units. Colonies of the same lineage are found in several settlements, so that in any settlement several different descent groups are represented, one of them, as I have already explained, being always dominant in it and identified with the settlement politically. Although the dispersed lineages of a clan do not intermarry, and sometimes acknowledge their common descent in other ways, a man generally thinks in terms of his localized lineage, reference being usually to the ancestor who founded the lineage in his settlement. It is interesting to note a further common feature of lineage systems: the descendants of a man who has settled with his wife's people trace their descent through the wife to the lineage in whose home they live. This practice is, as among the other Nilotic peoples, one of the ways in which stranger lineages are grafted into the genealogical structure of the dominant lineage in a settlement. However, until we know more than we do at present about the distribution of lineages, about their genealogical structure, and about the part they play in inter-settlement relations it will not be possible to estimate fully their political significance.

All the Shilluk settlements compose a common polity, the kingdom of Shillukland. They are

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segments of an organization. It seems that in pre-Turkish times there was a tendency for contiguous settlements to combine for war against other settlements or under the leadership of an outstanding personality, but such combinations were not permanent, or even consistent enough for us to speak of them as political groups. The Turkish Administration tried to give greater consistency to them so that they could be used as administrative units, and the Anglo-Egyptian Government has done the same and calls them divisions and appoints a chief for each. Previously they appear to have been little more than districts or localities, and the only chiefs between the king and the chiefs of settlements were those of Ger, northern Shillukland, and Luak, southern Shillukland, whose functions had, as we shall see, a ritual rather than an administrative character, and those of Muomo and Tonga, the settlements which are the northern and southern marches of Shillukland, whose functions were also partly ritual. In Shilluk speech Muomo and Tonga correspond exactly, Professor Westermann tells us, to the expression of the ancient Hebrews: from Dan unto Beersheba.¹

¹ Diedrich Westermann, *The Shilluk People. Their Language and Folklore* (1912), p. xx.

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Northern Shillukland and southern Shillukland are the arches of the politico-religious kingdom of the Shilluk of which the kingship is the keystone. That segmentation has taken this particular form is doubtless due to the peculiar ribbon-distribution of the Shilluk settlements.

The whole Shilluk people recognize a single head and we can therefore speak of the Shilluk nation and of their king, and it is with his place in the national polity that this lecture is particularly concerned. According to Shilluk tradition the present king is the thirty-first of his line. All the kings are believed to be descended from Nyikang, the leader of the Shilluk in their heroic age, who led them into their present homeland, conquering it from its inhabitants and dividing it among the lineages of his followers; and Nyikang, or, as we would say, the spirit of Nyikang, is believed to be in every king and to have passed from king to king down the line of his successors. Nyikang is thus a mythological personification of the timeless kingship which itself symbolizes the national structure, a changeless moral order.

The rule of succession is that only a son of a king can be invested with the kingship. As many sons of kings have never succeeded to the throne, there

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are to-day numerous and widely diffused branches of the royal clan whose members are ineligible for royal office and lack authority, unless they are also chiefs of settlements, although they are treated with deference by commoners in virtue of their descent. Indeed, the royal clan is easily the largest single clan in the whole country, being said to comprise perhaps a fifteenth of the nation. In some areas its members are more numerous than commoners and have supplanted commoner lineages in the chieftainship of settlements. This process, which continues to-day, has been going on for a long time, for it is said that Abudok, the eighth ruler (and only queen) of the Shilluk, prophesied that one day the royal clan would eat up the rest of the Shilluk.¹ It results from the custom of sending pregnant wives of a king from the royal capital to bear their children in other, generally their natal, settlements. Their daughters are not allowed to marry and therefore do not start lines of descent which would count as sisters' sons to the royal house. Their sons are brought up by settlement chiefs, often their mothers' brothers, and not in the capital. When a prince (*nyireth*) marries he builds a separate hamlet near that of the settlement chief

¹ Westermann, *op. cit.* p. 149.