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The Demise of Kings and the Meaning of Kingship: Royal Funerary Ceremony in the Contemporary Southern Sudan and Renaissance France

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> Perhaps there were never any gods without kings, or kings without gods (Hocart 1927: 7)

The existing commentary on divine kingship ranges extensively through history and social anthropology to poetry and psychoanalysis.[1] However, an appreciation of both the institution and contemporary interpretations still requires a return to the opening passages of Sir James Frazer's classic *The Golden Bough*. Here the reader encounters "a strange and recurring fantasy" set in a "sylvan landscape, suffused with a golden glow" and "dappled shade," which finds "a grim figure ever on the prowl," for "surely no crowned head can lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his." "The least relaxation of his vigilance, the smallest abatement of his strength of limb or skill of fence, put him in jeopardy; grey hairs might seal his death warrant" (Frazer 1963: 1).

These romantic lines provide a dramatic indication of the extent to which social anthropology and writing style have been transformed over the years in the process of academic professionalization. Neither grand questions nor grandiose exposition have survived the test of time. Yet many of the earlier disturbing uncertainties about the nature of the difference between the "savage and the civilized" remain unresolved; but neither have they disappeared, for today these perplexities subtly color, rather than explicitly inform, perception of ourselves and other cultures.

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[1] For such unusual interpretations of this institution, see T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* and Róheim 1972.

1. Divine Kingship

This situation is nowhere more apparent than in the study of kingship. Anthropologists in the generation after Frazer and other armchair practitioners, who were expected to spend an extended period of time among their subjects and thus, in many instances, in the context of viable kingships, most often chose to "study down," and chronicled the lives of commoners rather than royalty. For some reason, anthropologists assumed that the significant human experience in other cultures was grounded primarily in the everyday affairs of the masses.[2] Thus, except for a historical outline and an ethnographic corpus focusing on the administrative structure,[3] presently there is a

[2] See Mair's (1965: xiii) and Beattie's (1965: 10) discussions of their fieldwork concentrations among peasants in the kingdoms Buganda and Bunyoro. This interest in commoners was indicative of a contrast at the time between anthropologists in Africa as compared to the European historians' concern for royalty. This trend is now being reversed by the former's interest in kingship and the latter's quickening curiosity for social arrangements and lately even the more mundane experiences of the general populace, as exemplified by Braudel 1981. – A similar lack of inquisitiveness by social scientists in contemporary European royalty has also been noted by Shils and Young 1953 at the time of the last British coronation. They wrote: "It seems that even the most eminent scholars lose the sureness of touch when they enter the presence of Royalty" (63).

[3] For a recent example of this approach, see Mair 1977.