

relative scarcity of information bearing on the cultural meaning of African kingship. This is unfortunate, since these functioning monarchies, albeit in a colonial situation, provided the opportunity to study a political form with strong western historical correspondences. As Hocart opined some time ago, there "... is a very fine distinction between a king who is the incarnation of the Deity and one who is only his representative" (1927: 16).

In contrast to this lead, the principal contribution of these anthropologists was to label African and most other traditional non-western monarchal systems from the Valley of Mexico to Asia as "sacred" or "divine," in opposition to modern divine right European kingship.⁴ The latter were seen as more rational and secular in terms of the character of their legitimizing ideology.⁵ For example, one student of European kingship and royal rituals, to be referred to in detail, instructs his readers in a footnote that "... primitive uses of funeral effigies have relevance to religious rites and otherworldly beliefs, whereas the English and French usage served a secular ceremonial" (Giesey 1960: 79). However, with a revived interest in "the greatest of all anthropological problems, namely the explanation of cultural resemblances" (Needham 1970: xix), perhaps such crude oppositions will be replaced by a finer appreciation of cultural differences and correspondences.

This concern for elucidating potential, subtle similarities and contrasts motivates the present analysis of Shilluk divine kingship.⁶ Not only has

the institution been of compelling and long-term anthropological interest, it also continues to flourish today, as demonstrated by the installation of *Reth* Ayang Aney Kur Nyidhok⁷ in 1974 as the thirty-third monarch of these people. The Shilluk themselves are the northernmost Nilotes of the Sudan, and presently number about 200,000 – located in semi-discrete residential clusters on a ridge along the western bank of the Nile for one hundred and ten miles. They subsist on a mixed economy of fishing, agriculture, and herding.

Expansionism by both groups brought them into contact with their northern Arabic neighbors. As a consequence, they are encountered in the European exploration literature earlier, and with greater consistency, than their Nilotic-speaking cousins further to the south.⁸ James Bruce, one of the first seekers of the origin of the Nile, provides a written historical base line: in 1760, while in Sennar (north of the present Shilluk homeland), he mentions a "pagan" people to the south called the "Shillok," ruled over by a king (Bruce 1905: 369–371). Unfortunately, Bruce did not actually penetrate their homeland, so nothing more is learned for some time.

Significantly, the first reference to these people mentions their kingship, a subject which has always attracted the anthropological fancy. This is a reasonable interest since Shilluk culture projects a regnal idiom in the sense that their ideas about this institution inform and mold their interpretations of time, space and the relationship between this and the other world. As a result of this abiding concern, the bibliography on these people is quite extensive, but also confusing and contradictory.⁹ Although there are many unresolved questions, none has been more basic than the opposing views on the definition of the traditional function of the *reth*.

⁴ See the essays contained in the volume on *Sacred Kingship* by the International Congress for the History of Religions (1959). The contributions by historians in this collection and other works (see Chaney 1970) indicate a similar proclivity to emphasize the sacred, rather than secular, nature of archaic European kingships.

⁵ Following Figgis (1934: 5–6), the ideology of divine right assumed in addition to hereditary succession that the ruler was divinely ordained and accountable only to the Supreme Being who enjoined the obedience of the monarch's subjects. See also Gierke (1951: 30–37) and Ullman (1969: 71–110).

⁶ Preliminary archival and field research was conducted in the Sudan among the Shilluk from February to May in 1978. The research was made possible by a grant from the American Social Science Research Council, which is gratefully acknowledged.

⁷ The term *reth* (pl. *ror*) is usually translated as king, even though the root appears in other Nilotic languages for political leaders of different varieties.

⁸ This literature has been admirably summarized and employed in a reconstruction of early Shilluk trade and politics by Mercer 1971.

⁹ The principal general sources are: Crazzolara 1932, Evans-Pritchard 1948, Frost 1974, Hofmayr 1911 and 1925, Howell 1941 and 1953a, Lienhardt 1954, Mercer 1971, Pumphrey 1941, Riad 1956, Seligman and Seligman 1932, and Westermann 1970.