



Fig. 1: Shilluk Country

#### Unit 1: The corpse

The body of the deceased *reth* lies on a mattress on its right side, shrouded in white cloth. (White cloth is used throughout the ceremonies to enwrap sacred objects or to screen them from the public gaze.) The corpse is fanned by daughters and sisters of the deceased with fans made from the wings of the saddle-bill stork; wives of the late *reth* are not present. There is no public mourning or wailing in Fashoda or elsewhere in Shilluk country. (On this unit see Westermann 1912: 125; Howell and Thomson 1946: 18; Thomson 1948: 151; Howell 1952a: 158).

#### Unit 2: The sealing-up of the corpse

A night or two after the death of the king, his corpse is secretly carried to a village near Fashoda, where it is sealed up by *bang reth* in a specially prepared hut.<sup>4</sup> (See Westermann 1912: 136; Pumphrey 1941: 15; Howell and Thomson 1948: 18; Thomson 1948: 151; Howell 1952a: 158).

<sup>4</sup> *Bang reth* are personal retainers of kings who have cut links with the clans of their birth and established new exogamous descent groups.

#### Unit 3: The election of the successor

Several days after the late *reth*'s sealing-up, the most important Shilluk chiefs assemble and choose a new king. The chosen prince is summoned to Fashoda, where he is shaved and washed. A fire is kindled in the traditional way by friction produced through the continuous twirling of sticks in the hole of a wooden club, a method called *pic mac*.<sup>5</sup> (See Hofmayr 1925: 148; Howell and Thomson 1946: 27–37; 80–81, Appendix 1; Thomson 1948: 152–154; Howell 1953: 190–191.)

#### Unit 4: The transference of the late *reth*'s remains

The late *reth*'s "sacred things," *jomkwer*, and his remains are brought to the location of his second burial and enshrinement. This transference is secretly undertaken at night by members of the *ororo* clan.<sup>6</sup> The deceased *reth*'s remains are taken from the hut in which his corpse has been sealed up and put into a bag made of the hide of a calf especially sacrificed for this occasion. Only a small party actually travels with the remains, but there is an advance guard which is entitled to seize gifts from those who cross their path. During the transference sheep are sacrificed at each water course that is to be crossed. Before entering the village of enshrinement the party steps over an ox which is then sacrificed. This kind of sacrifice, called *akadh* (from *akadho*, to cross over), takes place at many stages of the ceremonies. (See Thomson 1948: 152; Howell 1952a: 159–160.)

<sup>5</sup> The symbolism of extinguishing and rekindling fire indicates a rite of renewal and of initiation into a new phase of life, an interpretation which is supported by the fact that the three occasions on which the *pic mac* takes place coincide with what could be regarded, following Van Gennep (1960), as the end of the phases of separation, transition, and incorporation of the new *reth*'s rite of passage (after his election, shortly before his induction, after his induction). In my opinion, the *pic mac* is also a rite of purification. The notion that fire purges and cleanses is widespread in all parts of the world. Among the Shilluk there is an important temporal link between the *pic mac* and another obvious rite of purification: whenever the fires are rekindled, and only then, the *reth*-elect is also ritually bathed.

<sup>6</sup> *Ororo* are Shilluk whose patrilineal descent groups formerly belonged to the royal clan but who have lost their entitlement to provide a king. The *ororo*'s ritual functions during the interregnum are significant.