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## REFERENCES

Simon SIMONSE. — *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Foreword by Mark Anspach. Kampala, Fountain Publishers, 2017, 535 p.

- 1 This path-breaking study of African political systems was first published in 1992<sup>1</sup> and was then hailed by select insiders as a major, original contribution to the comparative study of African political systems. It is a fascinating and rich work that deserves to be reissued. The current edition<sup>2</sup> is more or less the same as to argument and case studies, but was expanded, updated and refined, and notably augmented with many excellent and telling illustrations. What has changed in this edition compared to the 1992 version is not made clear in the text. The acknowledgements of the first edition were reprinted here unchanged. Only a close reading and comparison with the 1992 work can reveal where and how text was added, where the argument was corrected or modified, or expanded. Next to the excellent new foreword by Mark Anspach, there are changes in Chapter 1, with more on the “scenario” in which states can emerge from early kingship, with a more extended study on the Buganda case. In chapter 1 (on p. 22 and on p. 230), there is also more explication of Evans-Pritchard’s model of “balanced” segmentary opposition with regard to early kingship; and also some cases are more elaborately described with new empirical material added (*e.g.*, in footnote 26 in chapter 18).
- 2 The 1992 edition did not get enough attention except from a small circle of Sudan scholars and specialists in divine kingship studies. The conjuncture in social studies around 1990—more geared to contemporary issues and development studies—and

probably also the high price of the Brill edition (ca. \$200) did not help to plug the book. But its importance cannot be overstated, as it is a definitive study of the “divine kingdoms” of South Sudan and of some elementary processes of political power formation rooted in mimesis and rivalry (thus conflict) in the relations between power-holders/kings—usually also rainmakers—and their people. Although the setting is Southern Sudan, based on ethnographic work among unknown, but by no means isolated, smaller ethnic groups—the Bari, Lulubo, Pari, Lokoya and Lotuho—the work can stand as an exemplary study of the nature of key principles of authority, political order and conflict in Africa. It has as its central theme the mechanism, very evident in these kingdoms, of leaders (kings) of a community “taking the blame”—often literally in times of mishaps and calamities, notably droughts, disease and excessive inter-ethnic conflict—the “scapegoat kings” (as an “alternative” to external enemies who could also be held responsible and attacked, but that would mean protracted and costly war). These kings—incumbents of “sovereignty” but contested and conditionally in power—are the embodiment of well-being and of disaster befalling the community: either scapegoats or conductors of (negative) energy. In their position, they have to be or rather *are* held responsible, and as political figureheads often suffer the consequences, including violent death by their subjects. The author has identified several cases where this actually occurred. This death (in contrast to a natural death) temporarily restores communal consensus. Here is a universal human socio-psychological mechanism that has always to be addressed: people want to know “who did it,” who “had a hand in it,” despite the fact that those “taking the blame” are innocent of actually “doing it” or of “causing” the calamity, because there is of course no real causal relationship. We may recognize the same human tendency of seeking “guilty ones” in the socio-political domain still at work in the developed, allegedly more scientifically oriented societies in times of crisis.

- 3 Obviously, Simonse here has drawn upon René Girard’s theory on mimesis and scapegoating in human society, and he has done so in a very inspiring and pertinent manner, showing the internal dynamics of “the political” in these African societies and revealing their conceptions and performance of power.
- 4 In 4 parts and 20 chapters, the author treats the historical and cultural context of the societies in question, the theoretical points of departure rooted in Girardian theory, and the actual cases of kingship and rain-making in the performance of power, addressing the tension in the double role of the king as “aggressor of his people” and as “victim of the aggression of his people,” or between centralism and dualism in the relation of the king with the people. The king is thereby (see chapter 1) the “focus of suspense, lever of consensus and inventor on the state.” The element of suspense, *i.e.* the tense phase *before* a ruler is installed as king and is susceptible to insult and abuse by his “subjects,” is an important addition of Simonse to Girard’s theory of the king as scapegoat: the (potential) king, whose role for the general well-being and consensus-creation in society is anticipated by the people, is seen as a victim first, and in itself this has a unifying effect on the (political) community. One might see this phenomenon as a first, elementary version of the later “social contract” idea between ruler and the ruled, but now in a more embodied, direct sense, not based on a tradition of political philosophy as developed in the West.
- 5 In developing his arguments on the basis of excellent ethnographic descriptions of the five societies— simple in their material culture but quite complex in their social

organization and cultural symbolism—Simonse also shows that the classic distinction in early political anthropology between stateless and state societies as political types in Africa was never really tenable, and that there can be development from one into the other, or even oscillation of the centralist and dualist element in society, the latter element often based on territorial and age-class organization. There is a continuum of power formation and crystallization, from more “acephalous,” segmentary forms to those based on the rule of leaders or kings above the people, who came to power either by usurping power or by being appointed. We already see this in the early phases of Greek and Roman antiquity, when kings were appointed and deposed (in crisis moments) via “democratic” or “republican” revolt.

- 6 Simonse’s book, which would need much more commentary and explication than can be offered here, thus stands in the center of a long tradition of political anthropology, addressing key questions on the formation and exercise of power, although set in a very specific ethnographic environment—the above-mentioned five small-scale Nilotic-speaking societies in Southern Sudan. It was (in 1992), and still now is, unique in its thorough, comparative approach and its theoretical examination of the empirical material—material which is highly original and in-depth, based on long fieldwork and intensive archival research. The wealth of case studies, both from fieldwork and from the relatively rich 19<sup>th</sup> century travellers’ literature is surprising. The theoretical framework derived from R. Girard’s theory of “scapegoating” and mimetic rivalry in human society—imitative behaviour based on the desires of others—is well-elaborated and quite revealing. In fact, this book is a further attestation of the likelihood that Girard’s theory, based on a model of basic human dispositions regarding imitative rivalry and scape-goating so as to construct consensus, will gain in impact. Girard’s theory is “problematic” in that its basic ideas cannot easily be “refuted” because they are akin to metaphysical assumptions—however much they resonate in human psychology and however true they may be. But the theory’s influence has been growing steadily and will be shown to be more and more important in future decades. While Girard has outlined essential dimensions and mechanisms of human socio-political life, a better historical and cultural contextualization or testing of his theory is needed, and this is what Simonse’s book provides.
- 7 In drawing on Girard’s theory, he also offered a general model of politics relevant not only for Africa (although it is of course based on the local ethnographic particulars), but for more general application, and also sheds light on modern forms of politics in comparative perspective. Reading this book can also contribute much to a historical understanding of the political and social mayhem of today’s South Sudan, partly the result of the appalling violence perpetrated by the northern Sudan governments against South Sudanese societies and political systems in the long civil war (up to 2011), and subsequently in the internal South Sudan civil war since 2013, whereby militarized rule and faulty, abusive leadership continued the politics of violence, again bypassing local cultural-political traditions and destroying structures for the controlled use of violence and the creation of order. While the comparative focus on the five societies in this book is fruitful, the argument—and the testing of R. Girard’s theoretical notions—could perhaps also be extended to adjacent societies, where (divine) kingship perhaps did not exist in similar fashion as in the cases discussed here, but showed varieties of local ritual leader-“priests” that also have that ambivalent relationship to their people, being symbolically threatened or demoted at crisis moments, being seen as a “lighting rod” to absorb tension. Some Eastern Sudanic/Surmic-speaking societies like Mursi,

Suri, Didinga or Murle come to mind, where ritual leader-rainmakers are sometimes ritually attacked by the people but are societies that never made the transition to kingship or incipient state formation.

- 8 This book deserves to be widely read and digested, also in anthropology. It is a remarkable and monumental study of lasting value, *i.e.*, a potential classic. Its republication after 25 years is fully justified, notwithstanding the probably strongly divergent conditions now prevailing in South Sudan after decades of ongoing destruction of the socio-economic and political fabric by self-serving elites and a culture of unregulated political violence. While a hefty tome of 535 pages and very complex in its ethnographic details, it is well worth reading and makes an indispensable contribution to the study of kingship, political sovereignty and politics that cannot be neglected in future scholarly discussions.
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## NOTES

1. This first edition appeared that year under exactly the same title with E.J. Brill, Leiden.
2. It was co-published with Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI, 2018, 555 p., bibl.