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Disasters, tugg'd with fortune

Review by Brendan Tuttle

Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southern Sudan

By Simon Simonse

Michigan State University Press, 2018

Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southern Sudan (Michigan State & Fountain) is a remarkable ethnography of people whose sense of commonality is produced by their common opposition to their kings. The book brings together an impressive body of archival sources and excellent ethnographic research but has remained underappreciated outside a small circle of specialists. Partly this was a matter of timing. Simonse carried out his first research trip in 1981, while he was teaching at Juba University. During the next five years, Juba came under siege, becoming a key government-controlled outpost circled by rebel-held territory. Extended work outside the town became more and more difficult. By the time the book was published in 1992, Sudan had been at war for nearly a decade and the book's subject matter seemed part of the discipline's history. Political anthropology was giving way to the anthropology of the state and interest shifted from 'traditional registers' of power to the bio-politics of bodies and populations and discourses of science and health (Hansen & Stepputat, 2016, pp. 299-300).

Simonse's 'ethnological field' (p. 52) is a stretch of southernmost South Sudan that runs from the bank of the Nile at Juba to the Dongotona Mountains on the Kidepo River, a distance of one-hundred and fifty miles, broken here and there by abrupt mountains. Residents of the Nile's east bank (Bari, Latuho, Lokoya, Lulubo, Pari, and others) share modes of subsistence and social organization, age-class systems with *monyomiji* ('owners' or 'fathers of the village') who manage village affairs, and rainmakers. The rains in this part of South Sudan are unpredictable, but generally begin to fall in late March or early April, though there may be occasional showers in January and February. May is usually

wet. In June there is often a break of two or three weeks when the rains do not fall. After this dry interval, the rains usually continue until September or October, with a few days of heavy rain in November or December.

Rainmakers' standing varied from place to place; most shared the title of 'king' with a handful of others responsible for protecting against a host of disasters (epidemics and epizootics, infertility, caterpillars and pests, and so forth); some were powerful rulers with kingdoms comprising more than a dozen large villages, others' power only extended to a few settlements. Occupying the edge of social order, kings played an important role in settling disputes between factions within kingdoms and brokering relations across their boundaries on land and in the sky. All tended to be held responsible when the rains did not fall when they were expected: 'every rainy season was of a test of their royal legitimacy,' Simonse writes, 'not only of their effectiveness as Rainmakers but also of their capacity to maintain internal peace and keep [rivals] at bay' (p. 37). Simonse describes the drama that unfolds during times of drought and other disasters, and how people led by the *monyomiji* try to identify the cause of the king's anger (a cross word or disrespect toward the rainmaker, the theft of a rainmaker's goat, or quarrelling or deeper divisions) to find a remedy. Tribute would be collected and any sacrifices that had been put off are made. If drought continued, suspense builds. A rainmaker may accuse people of neglecting their responsibilities. People accuse the rainmaker of withholding rain out of simple meanness or indifference to their predicament. As more and more people turn against the rainmaker, the king will try to stall by making speeches or demanding more and more complicated sacrifices or blaming a rival. Usually, the rain comes. If not, the dangers are considerable—Simonse reviews two dozen cases of regicide between 1840 and 1986 (pp. 383-387)—and the rainmaker must flee or face an angry community that is united in purpose. This drama is the subject of the book.

Kings of Disaster is divided into four parts. In part I, the introduction and the first two chapters are concerned with defining a set of categories for analytic use. Simonse begins by laying out René Girard's idea that because we model our desires on the desires of others, conflict is inevitable; we all end up wanting the same thing. What prevents this rivalry and quarrelling and jealousy from leading to a war of everyone against everyone, Girard says, is our tendency to single out a victim and blame this state of affairs on some hapless scapegoat. This provides an object we can share. The death (or expulsion) of the victim provides relief from quarrelling, and with the restoration of a kind of harmony, a strange thing happens. Sacrificial victims come to embody the relief from disagreement felt by those

who acted together. In death, the victim is transformed into a kind of divinity.

Simonse's theoretical approach is drawn partly from Girard's 'scapegoat mechanism' and partly from Evans-Pritchard's discussion of balanced or 'complementary segmentary opposition' in *The Nuer*, where he describes how lineages come into being through their opposition to other lineages (Evans-Pritchard, 1940, p.143). On the east bank of the Nile, in the course of their encounters during times of disaster, the king and people face off in what Simonse calls 'the enemy scenario' (in order to draw attention to its stereotypic and theatrical qualities), which plays out in smaller ways across sections, villages, and age-sets. The potential for violence, or the 'suspense of war,' he says, has the effect of dividing people neatly in two as they define groups by defining themselves against each other. There were normally social divisions among lineages and villages, young people and their seniors. During times when disaster touched everyone, though, all bets were off, meaning everyone against the king.

What, Simonse asks, would an approach to kingship look like if it were to take these principles of opposition as its starting point? It would look very different from the method introduced in *African Political Systems* (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1950). As a clan or section is united politically against all other sections, Simonse argues, people are constituted as 'a people' by their unity against the king. '[C]entralism is only a transformation of dualism with a different cast: one of the social segments is replaced with the king' (p. 454). Rather than having to distinguish between societies with no centralized political authority and states with kings or paramount chiefs, then, we can see these as conversions of the same 'mechanism by which social consensus is achieved' (p. 207). Once Simonse lays this out, it must be said, everything else begins to fall in place. The result, sometimes disorienting to read, opens up a whole series of new perspectives on South Sudanese history: about the nature of sovereignty (Graeber, 2011), processes of state formation and continuities of brokerage (Leonardi, 2013), competing images of administrative rule (Cormack, 2016), and the intellectual productivity of engagement with states (Kindersley, 2016).

Chapters 4-6 provide an historical ethnography of the processes that led, ultimately, to the incorporation of this region into Sudan. 'Far from being a collection of neatly arranged, different ethnic communities each with its own language, culture and migration history,' Simonse says (p. 67), 'the east bank of the Nile proves an area where processes of cultural assimilation between various groups of peoples have gone on for a considerable period of time.' The region was never an isolated place; and

the arrival, in 1841, of the first Ottoman expedition marked the start of just one period of exchange and circulation among many. When Ferdinand Werne visited Gondokoro in 1841 he met King Logunu (or, Lakono, a Bilinyam rain master) who was wearing a complicated feather hat, blue beads from Ethiopia, copper bracelets, and a blue cotton shirt made of India cloth. He explained to Werne how people exchanged the iron that they produced there for copper, beads, cloth, and salt that had travelled along trade routes linking Gondokoro to Sennar and more distant places, by way of the Baro-Sobat valley and Ethiopian highlands and Fazogli. Simonse's broad, comparative approach, (no doubt encouraged by difficult research conditions), and emphasis on the manner in which differences are produced through interconnections, provides an important corrective to an earlier tradition that portrays the region as isolated and composed of sharply defined ethnic groups whose relations were sporadic and violent.

The arguments of *Kings of Disaster* are developed through analyses of events in the history of the Nile's east bank. Part II is composed of two chapters and sketches out the dualistic structure of territorial and age-set institutions. Part III compares the dualistic structure of the relationship between king and people and the dualism of opposed groups, focusing on the antagonism of the king toward the people. The next part (IV) takes the other side and examines popular antagonism toward the king. The book's historical chapters echo Hocart's idea that structure is less a collection of binary oppositions than a kind of scenario that shapes the ways in which unpredictable events unfold over time. It is not hard to understand, for instance, why rainmakers caught in an endless game of brinkmanship with their own subjects might try to raise armies or look for allies against their people among the well-armed ivory and slave traders who began to arrive in the 1850s.

The book's final ethnographic chapter is a fascinating and detailed discussion of cosmologies of violence and peacemaking. For all the book's emphasis on the antagonism among age-sets and settlements and the king and people, Simonse's real interest lies in the construction of unity. This is the theme that knits the book together. He describes how ordinary routines of mock hostility continually represent the value of peacemaking by evoking its opposite and the difficulty and importance of achieving it.

A reader opening a book called *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King* might expect exotic priests and mistletoe and sacred groves. This is not Simonse's aim. Rather, he says, he aims to examine the role played by the rainmaker 'while doing justice both to the king's *earthiness* and

his *divinity*' (p. 99). By keeping both the sacred and the political in analytical view, he presents mature, self-conscious actors and challenges the separation that traditionally characterized the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of the State. 'What the Nilotic subject expects from his king, is, in fact, very similar to what modern citizens expect from their welfare states,' he says: 'protection from violence in a wide sense – enemies, a wide range of factors influencing the security of livelihood, epidemics and diseases' (Simonse, 2005, p. 72). The obvious question remains: why would rainmakers encourage rumors of their involvement in drought? At the very least, perhaps, cultivating a reputation for being able to rain down a plague of insects or cause everyone's crops to wither offers protection against being insulted or having one's goats stolen. But the attraction of kingship is also something very familiar: about being the kind of person that others listen to and—having access to powers that others do not—place in a central role in times of crisis.

Kings of Disaster is an excellent example of the Lieden tradition of anthropology in South Sudan and provides a welcome historical examination of how regional processes have shaped the course of larger events. Readers may be uncomfortable with Simonse's use of Girard's to structure his account. (I admit I'm not entirely sure what to make of Girard myself.) But it allows him to organize a fascinating, complicated story and to raise important questions; and the device does not diminish the originality of Simonse's insight, nor take away from what is a really excellent book.

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¹ Page numbers refer to *Kings of Disaster*, 2018, Fountain, Uganda.

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