Medicine and Kingship

Endogenous Centralization in East and Central Africa

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Despite a vast and recently reinvigorated body of research, a glaring lacuna remains in the literature on African chief- and kingship. Exogenous sociostructural explanations (Vansina) and the universalist concept of sacred kingship (de Heusch) disregard the endogenous regional process of political centralization. This article proposes a corrected structuralism as a method to detect in cultural processes their endogenous basis, or "tensor": a syntagm paradigmatically "stretched" in time and space. Ethnographic fieldwork in east and central Africa reveals that both chieftaincy and status acquisition revolve around medicine, not governance. The tensor of medicine combines two sacrificial practices, divination and initiation, and two gift-oriented practices, magic and association. In terms of this tensor, kingship is a freak development, violating the democratic principle of medicine. Ethnographic comparison confirms that kings split the tensor by privileging the binding logic of gifts at the expense of divination and initiation, which control the chief's power. In contrast, the colonial impact on centralization is a collapsed tensor, banning the mixed political-religious practices of magic and divination in favor of a religiously legitimated political hierarchy. Tensor dynamics bring out pivots of meaning that shake the European default model of the polity.

Online enhancements: supplemental figures

The current guises of reemerging African chiefship, ranging from brokerage for nongovernmental organizations to regional representation at the government level, have led John and Jean Comaroff (2018:38) to speak of an "extraordinarily flexible institution," far from homogenous or even contrastable with "Euromodernist office." Yet, indications exist of regional models of power. The heterogeneous political history of sub-Saharan Africa is in itself unique, as Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) and later McIntosh (1999) argued. In the area around the African equator alone, conquest states sat next to decentralized trade complexes and kingdoms were bordered by chiefdoms and hunter groups, with levels of centralization varying during the last millennium (Vansina 1990). Also telling of the continent's specificity, a systematic comparison by Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson (2013:16) revealed no correlation between precolonial African states and the common Eurasian drivers of political centralization: population density, warfare, and trade. The failure of these sociostructural and mainly exogenous drivers to account for African precolonial centralizations prompts us to explore a cultural and endogenous track. Despite the call to decolonize Africanist knowledge, remarkably little is known of such internal causalities in precolonial history.

In the social sciences, endogenous processes may be sociostructural, such as population density increasing competition, or cultural, as in Weber's theory on Protestantism entailing capitalism (Kaufman 2004:336). This paper explores whether anthropology, thanks to the ethnographic method's sensitivity to cultural logics, may achieve for Africa what sociology did for Europe: to discover a cultural endogenous process characteristic of a region. Bayart's (1993) worthy attempt at an African model of rule illustrates a double caveat, though. His thesis of a precolonial politics of "the belly" impelling African postcolonial leaders to accumulate wealth leaves no room for social change or process (Clapham 1994:438). Moreover, his geographical demarcation—a continent—can hardly qualify as carrying a tradition. Structuralism has been maligned for both drawbacks as well, projecting the static model of a cognitive structure and overlooking the role of history in delimiting a culturally salient area.

This paper employs the structuralist method of discerning "logics" yet situates this cultural endogeneity not in individual cognition but in historical events, which the analytical tool of a tensor synthesizes. An example is the theory of secularization, which synthesizes Western Europe's history of modern subjects criticizing traditional frames, preceded by the persecution of pagan traditions labeled as witchcraft (Macfarlane 1999) and resurfacing today in the Euro-American antagonism of progressives and conservatives (see Bruce 2011). A tensor of such historical depth and region-wide significance, articulated in the secularization process, provides insight into the local decline of church attendance, which a single community's history alone cannot account for. Moreover, the geographical unit appropriate for the studied process cannot be decided beforehand. The area to which endogeneity applies must share a history in line with Braudel's (1958) notion of mentalities pertaining to the *longue durée*. Herskovits's (1930:54) culture

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areas, such as the east African cattle complex or the Congo area, were presumably built from the diffusion of atomistic traits. The tensor, however, holistically characterizes history, identifying the recurring relations of ideas and practices in a society as well as their changes. It affects our own accounts of African history, as in Vansina's (1990:122) secularist premise that the "miracles" of magic "reinforce the whole institutional complex": the sacred sphere would legitimate the profane order of governance. Scholarship anno 2021 may be more willing to reconceive of the political in terms of medicine, the safeguarding of life.

Given the above caveats, this article proceeds in seven steps to identify a culturally endogenous causality in the centralization of power along and south of the African equator. A brief reappraisal of the debate on African kingship between the historian Jan Vansina and the structuralist Luc de Heusch shows the first to be groping for cultural endogeneity and the second to not historically delimit the salient area. Their data, however, converge toward the source of chieftaincy. Integrating additional data on two semantic strands in Bantu languages, I translate this source as the ritual acquisition of a power (with the stem *kum*) other than the natural growth into elderly authority (with the stem *kul*). Second, interviews with Sukuma chiefs underline the tension between medicine and governance as two references of rule, with the first antagonizing the colonial administration. In our definition, medicine includes objects and practices believed to have healing, life-giving, or other power.

Third, I turn to the ethnographer's experience in the field, participating in local rites of passage that transmit the community's concept of power. Key for the initiands is to obtain the "forest-within," a concoction symbolizing the region's medicinal tradition of *kum*, indeed parallel to that of elderly authority. After regional comparison, the distinction presumed by the concoction appears to undergird four institutions (or established practices) that systematically co-occur in ritual acquisition: divination, initiation, magic, and association. Abbreviated "DIMA," they are the components of the tensor "stretching" social space in a culturally logical way. Across the region, practices to attain power seem to have retained this fourfold basis, despite growing cultural diversity since 1000 CE. The broad historical context for this medicinal basis is the "Bantu population collapse" in 400–600 CE possibly promoted by prolonged epidemic (Seidensticker et al. 2021) and the use of shells in 800 CE, probably for initiatory titles (de Maret 1985). A methodological section explains the syntagmatic and paradigmatic validity our analysis strives for. The metaphor (forest-within), the distinction (*kum*/*kul*), and the fourfold institutional complex (DIMA) describe in ever more specific ways a condition considered transitional for the initiand yet permanent for the chief. The syntagm of elements derived in the first three steps has a paradigmatic dimension, which cases of change such as centralization reveal.

Fourth, and representing the core of our analysis, we study the change of chiefly power in cases of radically centralized rule. For such a ruler, whose source of legitimacy is neither medicine nor elderhood, the structure of autocracy and enslavement prevails, earning him the title of "king" as opposed to chief or elder. The triad sets us on a collision course with the dominant anthropological literature on sacred kingship. Historical data are presented, however, to demonstrate that precolonial kingship followed from an endogenous change of chiefly power. In this process of centralization, the ruling dynasty evaded the democratic, countervailing institutions of divination and initiation while exploiting the court's mastery of magic and hierarchical association. Extrapolating the dynamic, we will also recognize in the postcolonial regime's insatiable accumulation this centralized type eliminating the fourfold balanced rule of medicine. Fifth, confirmation is found in the process undergone by enthronement rituals in four Sukuma chiefdoms. During the first half of the twentieth century, these rituals evolved to prioritize the enslaving gift dimension of chieftaincy at the expense of its sacrificial aspects (a distinction further specified at the end of the article). The local interventions, to comply with assumed wishes of the colonizer for centralization, indicate that for some elders the endogenous shift has the depth of a cognitive structure.

The contrasting case of exogenous impact presents a sixth step in the analysis. The colonial take on centralized rule showed in its "purification" of chieftaincy. Magic (fetishes) and divination were forbidden, whereas the initiatory rituals and corresponding hierarchy were tolerated. In this colonial impact transpires the aforementioned Eurocentric focus on secularization, bedeviling Africanist scholarship itself. The seventh step to test the tensor's level of significance in the region concerns the failure of such exogenous impact to root itself before colonization. Precolonial witch-finding movements that resemble the colonial exogenous type of centralization exhibited a cyclical rise and fall, because they lacked the cultural basis for lasting impact. The colonizer later managed to overcome this lack through violence, a religion of conversion, and a changed social structure.

Revisiting Vansina's and de Heusch's Equatorial Traditions

Kingship can be defined as an office occupied by a paramount whose rule is sovereign and whose state is centralized around an economic and political capital (Claessen 2011). Chieftaincy refers to a hereditary title similarly befalling members of a certain clan responsible for the well-being of the land and its inhabitants, yet in a system of parallel rulers without paramount. Each chiefdom covers a loosely demarcated area of villages represented by headmen. Africanist descriptions of centralizations into a state have been sociostructural and rarely region-specific. They range from a process of subjugation "planting out sub-dynasties from a central source" (Ogot 1964:296; Southall 1956) to the inverse "levitation" by a growing lineage expanding its hierarchy (Kopytoff 1999:91), with a possibility in between of villages coalescing while conserving their headmanships, thus creating a multitier chieftaincy under a paramount (Vansina 1990:175).

After four decades of research, Jan Vansina (1990:xii) managed to bring together in his classic *Paths in the Rainforests*

historical, archaeological, linguistic, and ethnographic data to derive an equatorial ancestral tradition, "a powerful endogenous process" dating back to the migration from the Grassfields of groups speaking "proto-Bantu." The tradition consisted of three sociospatial units interlocking to form a polity: the house (a residential unit of bilateral kin), the village, and the district, respectively ruled by big men intent on keeping their autonomy, by headmen, and by chiefs or kings. Yet, what he assembled to call a tradition were elements of social structure that did not reveal the ways a society applied premises in practice. The rationale for his geographic scope was solid. The western, central, and eastern parts of the Congo Basin rainforest had developed three variants on the tradition. The relative influence of the sociospatial units had shifted in history due to ecological and economic factors, such as slavery and ivory trade, and abruptly ended with colonization. But toward the middle of the book, after delving into centuries of history, Vansina (1990:127) surprises the reader by minimizing the ancestral tradition, because of those changes before 1850. His sudden skepticism would have been less likely had he included the cultural dimension at which an endogenous tradition operates and evolves and wherefrom could originate the variety of political institutions. In his ethnographic fieldwork in Tio and Kuba societies, he worked mainly with educated court members as a historian in search of facts.

Versed in the ethnography of the same region, de Heusch (2002:156) rejected the "economism" of Vansina. Following the Annales school, his method inverted the relation between infrastructure and superstructure to see "mentalities" shaping rather than following politico-economic processes. Although this may augur well for the cultural-endogenous dynamic we are after, and de Heusch did point out the difference between African and Euro-Asian sacrifices as well as kingships, he provided no rationale for taking the whole African continent as his geographic scope. His intention was to rework the grand narrative of Frazer, on the king being both scapegoat and divine creature prohibited to show weakness under penalty of regicide. De Heusch (2002:196) proposed sacred instead of divine kingship, based on his comparative fieldwork in the Congo Basin during the 1950s. Centralized rule would arise where the ideological revolution takes place of believing in someone's possession of magical power, as in the southwestern groups of the Mongo-speaking area wherefrom the famous Kuba kingdom originated. The primary figure undergoing "sacralization" would be a big man endowed with ritual dignity (*ekopo*). He earns the title of *n-kum-u* chief after organizing a potlatch and performing a transgression during initiation in the form of incest or human sacrifice, which is required by the spirit and, more importantly, establishes his alterity or transcendence beyond the social order of the lineage elders.

My main argument against sacred kingship is that magic is a common possession among villagers. It still is today, if well hidden because of the Christian war on the fetish. Magic in itself could not single out chief or king. Nor could his transgression, which any initiation ritual requires. The hunter groups that inspired the cosmology of the (mainly agricultural) chiefdoms were egalitarian but had societies initiating into ranks of medicine, spirit communication, and divination, such as the pangolin cult (see Douglas 1963). The belief that magic would be a personal quality is corroborated neither by historical data nor by contemporary ethnography. The incumbent's magical powers or charisma may be celebrated in myths, but this quality was not formally assessed among the candidates for succession. Culturally, it would also not be meaningful for the cult members to worship the highest ranked that they themselves organized the initiation of. The autonomy of big men, which both Vansina and de Heusch emphasize in rare agreement, rests on the magic all possess and not even a chief can claim to monopolize. Clearly then, for a big man to become autocrat, something other than magic is needed. Denuded of its diurnal and democratic quality, magic becomes a red herring in the study of power in this part of Africa.

Where the linguistic data concur with de Heusch (1986:20) is his distinction between magic power and the lineage logic of elders. His duality revised the classic opposition of profane and sacred by Hubert and Mauss, on sacrifice communicating between the realms and the king as ultimate mediator. In the Congo Basin, the title for chiefship has *kum* as Bantu linguistic stem. A thousand kilometers to the east, in the Great Lakes including Sukuma communities, the Bantu reflexes of *kum* mean healer. In an area more or less encompassing central and eastern Africa, medicine is the source for both chief and healer, their semantic affinity showing in this linguistic bifurcation (in contrast with Euro-Asian trajectories of governance that oppose the two offices through the concepts of king and priest). We will obtain supporting evidence from the tension between *kum* and *kul* institutions, distinguishing gift from sacrifice, the first yielding fame through discontinuous acquisition, the second fulfilling duty in a continuous cycle.

The institutions do not exclude one another, contrary to de Heusch's (1981:66, 2002:124) claim about the contrast between the southwest and southeast Mongo regions. In the latter area, the lineage elders would have too much authority for the "master of the forest" to possess magico-religious quality, despite his potlatch yielding the similar title of *nkumi* as well as granting the right to forest sections, to settling disputes, and to wearing a leopard skin. The fact that chiefly authority varies rather seems evidence to the contrary, that a chief's consecration applies common medicinal principles of initiation. In other words, de Heusch all too readily equates chiefs with kings. Ample support can be found in the literature that, following an oracle or call, any adult can enter a medicinal cult through initiation (Vansina 1990:121; see also the Lemba cult in Janzen 1982:4). We can think again of the animist hunter approaching the forest not as an extension of the lineage but as a source of life through gifts that yield credit in the form of shot game. Like the medium at the Loango coast fleeing into the forest to learn about his personal obligation—already observed by Dapper's (1668:546) informant in the seventeenth century—novices venture into the unknown not to fulfil their duty but to gain

individual status, medicinal knowledge, and spirit blessing—as do chiefs. Moreover, novices show their capacity for making gifts—as do chiefs. The initiation organizes the sacrifice of one's former self, as does the chief's enthronement. Chiefs are a special case of this power acquisition through gift and sacrifice. Kingship deviates from it, although endogenously so.

Against the commonsense view on kingship as the natural sequel to chieftaincy in the human quest of power, I ask as an ethnographer how an autocratic office could emerge in African cultures cherishing the autonomy of magic users, to which the institution of chieftaincy was adapted. The short answer I propose is that the autocrat transformed the local way of gaining status outside of elderhood and clan membership. Political centralization had endogenous causes. Against Vansina's diffusionism explaining kingship, de Heusch (2000:23), his structuralist nemesis, leapt to the theory of a universal institution. Both failed to consider a region and its cultural logics, so as to raise the question whether the translation of a society's highest title into "king" or "chief" captures the meaning attributed by the people themselves. In their discussion of kingship, Graeber and Sahlins (2017:5) made the same leap over region- and culture-specific process, despite Sahlins's (1968) famous tenet that culture intervenes in the relation between cause and effect (e.g., between desertification and nomadic life). Social change does not happen without endogenous basis, which our study names a tensor: cause [tensor] effect. A cultural influence is multidimensional rather than one- or two-dimensional; hence, we speak of a tensor instead of vector or matrix.

Ethnographic Base: A Tensor Named Forest-Within

Among Sukuma farmers in northwest Tanzania, where I did fieldwork from 1995 to 1997, the metaphor for the endogenous dynamic is the medicinal bundle *bu ya mu kaya*, "forest of within the home," shortened here to forest-within, which the novices obtain after village initiation. Their rituals to empower, heal, or "cool" (*ku-poja*) combine the same four practices. First, a divination will determine the spirits' approval of the ritual. The novices become initiated by sacrificing their former self. They obtain the magic of fertility from the forest. The gift they made corresponds to a rank in the association or cult.

The male initiation named *ihane* was still widely practiced in the northern parts of the Sukuma-speaking Mwanza region when I participated in 1996. At the center of the senior novice's compound, all participants pledged their allegiance to the medicinal association of "elderhood" (*bunamhala*). An oracle verified ancestral blessing. The rooster was held up above the squatted audience and directed in honor of eight points of the compass, each recalling an event, clan alliance, or invention. In two years of fieldwork this was the only time I heard the villagers refer to a regional history, a membership of the "Sukuma wing" (*inana lya kisukuma*) transcending all chiefdoms. By showing the medicinal bundle proving membership, a visitor can count on hospitality, something traveling healers rely on. After Tanzania's official abolishment of chieftaincy in 1961, the medicinal initiation of the villagers is the remaining link with traditional rule beyond the level of the village council. The opening ceremony underlined the respect, *ikujo*, for elderhood, a type of status that naturally comes with age. Literally meaning "what makes one grow (up)," *ikujo* is the causative reflex of the verb *kul*, "to grow (up)." *Kul* is also the stem of the widespread Bantu word for elder or headman.

In the next stage of initiation, *kul* was juxtaposed with *kum*, another semantic field. By undergoing the discontinuous rite, the young men obtained status, *lukumo*, best translated as fame but also said to refer to collection, as in a capital accumulated. Retreating in the forest, they learned about medicine and completed an ordeal evoking indebtedness to the group. Then they "came out," a verb sharing the *f*/*kum* stem of *lukumo*. Smeared with the paste of roasted black groundnuts symbolizing rebirth, the novices invaded the homestead and planted their spears in the threshold of the house, defended by the women brandishing their ladles. Afterward, men and women sang in procession about novices "being given birth" (*kubyalwa*), a process of alliance endowed with leadership. A wooden peg with phallic connotation driven into the center of the courtyard embodied the association of elders. Its name is *mambo*, the word for chief in Lozi and other Bantu languages.

What does the union of *kul* and *kum* achieve? The concoction of 40 ingredients we collected in the forest was inserted in the fields to invoke rain. The two interconnected gourds of beer we drank from were compared to the fertility of the number two (*ibili*). We were henceforth entitled to the medicinal bundle, *bu ya mu kaya*. Its symbiosis of wild outside (*bu*) and home (*kaya*) to acquire new status is the standard structure of local medicine: mix plants with an "entering thing" (*shingila*) communicating a purpose. Whether the society I studied was *bunamhala*, for which the new rank holders organized a feast, or the Chwezi healing cult, which abducted members because of their spirit call, the rituals applied the same medicinal formula of risking "heat" in order to "cool." By heat is meant excessive or undomesticated fertility, which can be acquired through certain *shingila* from the forest after dream or seclusion, through possession by spirits, or in such anomalies as the birth of twins, breech birth, incest, and witchcraft (*bulogi*)—the latter a secretive act out of spite, not cool like magic (*bugota*). The leopard skin the chief wears recalls these sources of excess and the heat that the novices embraced in the forest. The chief sustains what novices temporarily are: the dangerous half of medicine. The ethnography thus substantiates my position in the debate on kingship, that the powerful are expected to excel in medicine and that the centralization of chiefship into kingship, if it is to be an endogenous transition toward supreme power, will draw on the transgressive part of medicine, the heat, *bu*, and alter *kum*, as we will demonstrate.

From Polity to Medicine

When probing for "the meaning attributed by the people themselves," renditions of chiefship by Sukuma courtiers oscillate

between governance and medicine. During my first fieldwork in northern rural Tanzania from 1995 to 1997, I was told by Kishina, the deposed chief of Bulima, that rain medicine was the basis of chieftaincy. In the chiefdom of Ndagalu, however, chief Kishosha orated to the public at his inauguration of the cultivation season in 1996 that Sukuma chieftaincy used to be a form of governance like the colonizer's, even though, he added tremblingly, it is now ceremonial. I noticed some members of the audience grumbling that they expected a medicinal ceremony.

Like them and Kishina, the court historian of Busiya named Daudi Ngonyeji emphasized to me in January 2018 the medicinal basis of ruling. His own chief Edward Makwaia deemed personal knowledge of medicine secondary, because courtiers will chip in. After all, the very reason that personality and even expertise matter little in the choice of incumbent (see Tanner 1957:208) is the materiality of medicine. For chief Kaphipa of Bukumbi, whom I interviewed regularly between 1995 and 2018, the rain medicine and protective magic became a thing of the past after he was enthroned in the late 1940s. The new incumbent of Bulima chiefdom spoke differently to me in 2018. Although he admitted to not possess the rain medicine, as proof of his legitimacy he referred to the experts in Mbarika descending from his royal clan. A few hundred meters from the graves of his predecessors, I indeed encountered a young healer living in an *iduku*, a grass house, waiting for the instructions of the new chief to begin divination and activate rain medicine.

John and Jean Comaroff (2018:39) note that chiefship "never actually went away, having been the perennial underside, the 'ghostly other,' of technorational, 'enlightened' governance, colonial and postcolonial—either immanently or manifestly, mythically or materially, its necessary supplement." They go on to illustrate the "neo-traditional" in rulers "asserting their monopoly over the ostensibly eternal character of custom" and reshaping it. But as I interpret the instances above, the chiefs still debate the endogenous undercurrent. While signaling customary knowledge to the researcher, they look querying at their council's healers performing the ritual. The chiefs mean by "our ways" exactly this medicine that determines their people's fate and that they have no monopoly over and nowadays feel unsure about, facing an indestructible vestige of the past when power and medicine were one.

The forest-within principle from the ethnography seamlessly links up with Devisch's (1993) concept of domesticated fertility among Yaka hunters as well as with Brandström's (1990) characterization of Sukuma and Nyamwezi chiefs as excessively fertile like twins and "one-sided"—that is, harboring undomesticated fertility symbolized by the matrilateral clan or "the back" (*ku migongo*) in opposition to children born in wedlock, "of both bow and back." We also recognize Tcherkézoff's (2017) association of Nyamwezi chiefship with the natural force of the right hand and with the fertility concept pervading the literature on king- and chiefship. Sukuma chiefs are no different from those in other groups speaking Bantu languages in observing prohibitions pertaining to the conservation of the chiefdom's fertility: he will not cross a river or have his blood touch soil, be proclaimed dead, or have his corpse leave the palace without the new incumbent having entered first. In keeping with Frazer, for Graeber and Sahlins (2017:8) these taboos attest to "unaccountable divine power" that (as a way of sacralization) the palace contains and the council controls. In my view, the prohibitions prevent the medicine the chief (as permanent fertility) actually is from losing its power, comparable to prohibitions rendering someone capable to hunt (see Willerslev, Vitebsky, and Alekseyev 2015). The chief is also *ntemi*, literally "the cutter," a judge by virtue of the ritual and shrine he inherited. His supreme title is designated by an oracle. He owns the chiefdom's largest drum only after undergoing initiation organized by the council of elders named *banang'oma*, "children of the drum." In analogy with a hunt, the logic of sacrifice surfaces, for nothing is certain. His ancestors may impair the fertility shrine or rain medicine.

To paraphrase Ferguson's (1990) cogent take on the development world as an antipolitics machine, politics is the antimedicinal machine. Practices of leadership and decision-making roughly resemble each other across the planet, but the polity, derived from the Old Greek *politeia*, equates society with governance. The polity prism subsumes medicine under a separate religious domain in service of governance, as in Vansina's premise. Cults would be invented for the sake of the dynasty, and political institutions ensure democracy (reproduced through tense moments of electoral contest). The above ethnography turns the European polity prism on its head: magic and divination curb autocratic tendencies and safeguard the relative autonomy of household heads (while the court's charm and shrine ensure the continuity of peace). Medicine democratizes the impact of chiefs. The chief rules within a tradition and network of medicinal practices from which no man or woman in the chiefdom can be excluded. A perspectival shift is needed, of which Evans-Pritchard (1937:157) made a famous attempt when claiming that a healer's inspiration does "not spring from the Supreme Being nor from the ghosts of the dead" but from ingesting the "right medicines." The shift requires us to de-exoticize magic in light of this materiality of thought, which secularization denounced as impure. In this region, the ultimate purpose of politics is medicine, comprising magical substances, divination, initiatory ritual, and cult. The chief, *(n)kum(u)*, becomes the medicine everyone is initiated in. Kingship, however, breaches the tradition; I will demonstrate this next. There can be cases of local kings displaying the sacred or even divine features claimed in the literature, but this will show in an altered concept of medicine.

From Chiefship to Kingship in Central and East Africa

Precolonial changes in power structure have been widely recorded for equatorial Africa. This section limits itself to the

precolonial societies of Rwanda, Kuba, Buganda, Rozvi, and Tio to compare fairly unequivocal cases of centralization into kingdoms. Transitions, it should be emphasized, are reversible. Some kingdoms suffering depletion of fertility, of land and people, crumbled to become chieftaincies or even less centralized groups. In the intricate history of the Kongo kingdom, for example, trade was regulated by the *ndunga* association during waning kingship in the nineteenth century (Vansina 1990:221). Whichever direction the transition takes, our question concerns the pivots on which it turns. The cultural practices that are systematically affected during major societal change should shed light on the region's internal causes of centralization.

Chrétien (2003:186) posits that Rwanda became a monarchical state in the mid-eighteenth century, as political centralization and military expansion reinforced each other. Vansina (2004:46) estimates that Rwandan kingship was invented around 1600 CE by Ndori, an immigrant from a chiefdom in the north. In neither case is the cultural drive explored that might underlie the sociostructural fact or the invention, respectively. If we consider the 20 chronological narratives recorded by Coupez and Kamanzi (1962) about four centuries of dynastic wars and tribulations (ca. 1450–1850), an endogenous evolution seems likely, which began in the preceding, less centralized dynasties. With the Rwandan state growing stronger, the stories emphasize aristocratic association and the hierarchy between Tutsi and Hutu (Stroeken 2018:278). Rwanda centralized into kingship as the chief no longer consulted diviners before important decisions and as he began to doubt the role of Providence (*Imana*). The rulers' autocratic tendency showed in their growing aversion to reciprocity with (and dependence on) the whimsical spirit world. The king governed the realm with his provincial chiefs and talked of Rwanda as a nation. He engaged in discourse ethnically labeling social groups within the country. Oratory self-praise became common among nobles. The courtiers who learned these "reflective narratives" (*ibitéekerezo*) by rote could hardly have fabricated the gradual evolution.

In the thirteenth chronicle, on Ndori's reign, the figure of cult leader Ryangombe comes to the fore. The diviner-healer and his cult live at the periphery of society, a new division that assumes the invisible world of spirits to be separate from the diurnal realm. Nobility showed in disciplined food intake, an indication of Taylor's (1999) thesis that the Rwandan nation-state sought to inscribe itself on the body. Soon after, in the fifteenth account regarding the death of Ryangombe, the court's protagonists break with another tradition by treating ritual initiation rather disparagingly as an invention. Strategies in war and conflict increasingly revolve around planning and ruse instead of oracular advice. In the more recent period of the kingdom, since Gisanura's reign, formalist execution of prescribed rites prevails. The king has a ritual officer to take care of the medicinal part. The double function of military and "mystical" (medicinal) rule, which according to Smith (1970:19) pervades the whole of Rwandan mythology and society, appears in the stories as a division that emerged over time with centralization (see supplemental figures).

In brief, the state arose endogenously as ceremonial procedure and hierarchy grew in prominence, while royal interventions marginalized practices of spirit reciprocity. The suggestion made by our analysis of Rwandese oral literature becomes tangible in the Kuba case. Vansina (1978:146) dates Kuba society's transition of "the Age of Chiefs" to "the Age of Kings" in the seventeenth century. The first king was Shyaam, "a diviner who won the kingdom by clever use of magic" (Vansina 1978:207). Unlike the chiefs before him, he refused to depend on a nature spirit, Kop aNgaan, to be designated ruler of the area. Initiation was still expected of his successors during installation (Vansina 1978:121). But they were kings for severing their authority from the workings of the royal charm. *Ncaam mashok* was placed in a duplicate court inhabited by their ritual expert, *muyum*. The segregation was such that the king, his chiefs, and all their clan members were prohibited from entering the settlement of the *muyum*'s clan. At the court, the eldest son of the king (*mwaaddy*) kept the oral and ceremonial traditions, together with the executor of royal rituals. Since the arrival of Shyaam, the council of elders representing the autochthonous *mbaangt* clans saw their influence dwindling; they were increasingly unable to admonish the paramount (Vansina 1978:146). It seems no coincidence that around this time the villagers had transformed their divination practices. They had replaced their oracles of *bukaang* (with proto-Bantu stem *gang*), widely encountered across the rainforest, by *ngwoom* divination. *Ngwoom* used to be the council's monopoly, broken no doubt by consent of a king on his path toward autocracy. Oracular inflation meant marginalizing indeed the council elders' divinations that once controlled the ruler.

Before Christian impact, several states emerged in the region just after their cosmologies had gone through an antishamanic phase. The spirits had metamorphosed into reliable champions of the ruler's law. Some thousand miles south of the Great Lakes lay the Rozvi Empire. Ranger and Kimambo (1972:24) cite Marthinus Daneel regarding a significant precolonial process wherein politics and religion coalesce, as the king's rainmaking spirit Mwari personified into a deity who could be consulted by people at the territorial shrines. A gap grew between commoners and a state-accredited religious caste whose initiation was no longer democratic or open to anyone visited by the roaming spirit. The personal obligation and dream through which hunters and healers discover plant recipes for cures and inherit charms for protection had pivoted away toward a veneration sanctioned by "priests" collaborating with the king, himself ceremonially deified. Culturally, this was a revolution. It went hand in hand with the rise of kingship.

Northeast of the Great Lakes, long before the influences of Christian conversion and education, the kingdom of Buganda had at crucial moments in its history witnessed the court's attack on spirit belief, as well as the recovery of that belief. Around 1700, King Tebandeke's mediumship was interpreted as madness, which led to the court separating the offices of king and medium (Chrétien 2003:157). Mutesa I further reduced the

importance of the Lubaale spirits in kingship and of the mediums serving them. A second cultural pivot of change emerged in Buganda in the early nineteenth century at the dawn of drastic centralization. Ssuuna II at his accession discontinued the ritual of "maturation" (*ku-kula*) wherein the Kabaka had to submit himself to initiation (Chrétien 2003:77).

Two thousand miles to the west, the less centralized Tio paramountcy went through a critical moment in the early twentieth century when kings wanted to postpone their *lisee* initiation. The lower-ranked chiefs, best described as "forest masters," insisted that kingship requires such an initiation, which included an ordeal and reciprocity with the spirits (Vansina 1973:395). The office of kingship was still seen by them as a rank, which incurred divinatory and initiatory obligations. The institution of forest masters declined in the mid-twentieth century when they no longer received haunches of the hunt and people no longer believed in the *nkira* nature spirits (Vansina 1973:490). Colonization and modern livelihoods had undermined the experiential relation with the forest. The Tio paramount could finally reject initiation and with it end the age-old balance of authority by medicine democratically learned and administered.

The four institutions feature in our case studies, displaying the same tendency. The practices of divination and initiation are two pivots of transition correlating negatively with centralization into kingship (strikethrough in the five cases of fig. 1). Magic and hierarchy are pivots sustained in kingdoms (no strikethrough in fig. 1). The interrelation and differentiation of these four institutions tear apart religious explanations of political change. A strong indication of this being an endogenous causality is that adolescents across the region are initiated into a knowledge and mode of being constituted by exactly those four institutions. After ethnographic and comparative work teased out these components of the tensor, this section delved into cases of change revealing how the components relate in a new constellation. Let me briefly contextualize the method and explain what I mean by the tensor being both syntagmatic and paradigmatic.

Tensor Dynamics: A Corrected Structuralism

Although unsuitable to evoke ethnographic nuance, structuralism has regained impetus with the so-called ontological turn for its analytic capacity to contrast modes of being and thus raise reflexivity (Descola 2016). The structuralist method pictures institutions at low resolution so that fieldwork in one time or place can be relevant to interpret their change in another time or place. The method limits itself to the structural changes of an institution in abstraction from historical contingencies, such as past external influences from Portuguese missionaries and Arab traders visiting central and east Africa.

Descola (1994) explains Amerindian animism by inverting Western naturalism, the belief in one body (the human organism) and many minds (we subjects). The endogenous logic appears through the two holistic dimensions of meaning that Lévi-Strauss's (1972) structuralism borrowed from Saussurean linguistics. First, in the syntagmatic dimension, the mode of being relates parts (mind, body, one, many) to a whole. "All bodies share one mind" is the syntagm (like a syntax) of animism. In our case study, medicine is the whole that the DIMA parts constitute. Second, in the paradigmatic dimension, the mode of being is relevant for more than one group, not only for the Achuar whom Descola lived with. Various practices and beliefs can fill in for the elements constituting animism, but they are limited by a "paradigm" that distinguishes this mode of being from its opposite, naturalism. The latter being the researcher's mode, what the tensor relates may be said to stimulate reflexivity. In our case study, the paradigm of DIMA comes to the fore in the way kingship transforms chieftaincy. Participatory observation trains the ethnographic fieldworker to reconstruct a tensor—that is, to detect the parts constituting a syntagm and extend or "stretch" (derived from the Latin *tendere*) their meaning paradigmatically. In this case, the researcher can culturally relate to kingship, but to understand the chiefship it transformed, she or he will turn to ethnography.

What shaped precolonial centralization, the comparative data above indicated, was a cultural innovation. The innovation was endogenous. The tensor of chiefship split in two, as illustrated in figure 2 by the vertical line separating DIMA. The king shunned what the hunter embraced: initiatory and divinatory practices. The two other marks of chiefship were magnified: the medicine of a charm or shrine that was territorial and the association into dynastic and aristocratic clans that constituted a hierarchy. The king used his wealth to make gifts that bind lower-ranked chiefs, who in return give to obtain rights to an aristocratic title. The latter implies an association of ranks. In Bantu myths, the archetypal origin of a dynastic clan is an inventor of medicine (often female) who founded a cult with ranks whose leadership became inheritable thanks to the medicine (Stroeken 2018:194). If hard to validate as "the" origin of Bantu kingship, the process is culturally logical, the tensor tells us, and a hypothesis deserving further historical study.

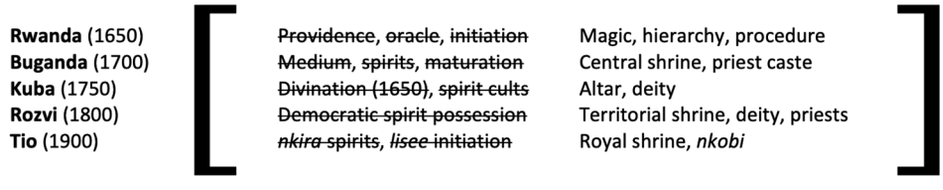

Figure 1. Five centralizations into kingship, one cultural process.

Figure 2. Split tensor of endogenous kingship. D = divination; I = initiation; M = magic; A = association.

The split between two halves during the shift toward centralization confirms the cultural salience of the four institutions in the tensor and how kingship undermined their democratizing and antiautocratic effect. The transformation paradigmatically corroborates the choice of components in the syntagm. More of this paradigmatic type of validation follows in the next section exploring whether the installation rites of the Sukuma chief underwent the same transformation. The colonial intervention in African kingship will permit further paradigmatic validation by studying a process of centralization that is not endogenous.

In his merciless critique of de Heusch's work, *Is Elegance Proof?*, Vansina (1983) rejected structuralism as a method with unfalsifiable claims. Yet, Vansina could have overcome his lack of reflexivity about the polity prism had he heeded structuralism's criterion of elegance, which is to strive for a double coherence. Let me recall the pivots of transition in kingship. The four institutions establish syntagmatic relations in that they together (as exhaustive and mutually exclusive variables) are supposed to cover the essence of each case of centralization. Does this operation, compelling the researcher to select interrelated institutions of high local relevance, not afford falsification? Second, the institutions should be truly involved in the changes identified by each case, confirming the paradigmatic relation between the tensor and the data on changes in the field. Again, the analysis conducts a falsifiable operation. This second coherence moreover invites us to look beyond the local situation and at one's own conceptual framework. The intercultural translation results in a reflexivity that can highlight endogenous dynamics. If we further test the tensor on historical and geographical validity, we will have corrected the absence of temporal and spatial specificity in structuralist analyses.

An important occasion to observe a tensor at work, we have seen, is during local initiations that render a traditional model accessible to young newcomers. The evolution in rituals installing the chief will be a subsequent verification of the pivots of transition, raising the validity of the tensor, as did the pivots' recurrence in our centralization cases.

Tensor Split in the Installation of Sukuma Chiefs

In the precolonial ritual of installation in Sukuma chiefdoms, before 1900, 12 steps could be distinguished according to Tanner (1957). First, the chief's death was concealed through standard euphemisms such as "the drum is broken" and through designation of an impersonator (*nabiji*) during the period of transition. After the court elders' oracle identified the successor, a delegation went off to seize him (cf. supra Chwezi spirit cult) and place him in seclusion together with a ritual companion. Their heads were shaven to mark the start of the chief's career. An official consort was appointed, next to his real wife, to later perform rituals with for the chiefdom. A young woman was brought to him for one night. The next day, the chief came out of seclusion to formally greet the public. A private swearing-in ceremony ensued. Verbal abuse of the chief marked the end of his initiation. The ceremony concluded with a ritual of placation at the altar of his ancestral spirits.

Comparing this precolonial ritual with the installation ceremonies of four Sukuma chiefdoms in 1927, 1944, and 1954, Tanner (1957:207) notes the omission of four acts during colonization: (1) concealment of the chief's death, (2) divination to choose the successor, (3) appointing an official consort, and (4) worship of ancestors. His explanatory frame is modernization and Christianity. More plausible, we argue, is an endogenous process undermining the antiautocratic tendency of the DIMA tensor of medicine. Without divination and ancestral ritual, invisible contingencies no longer mediate the power of the chief. Without an official consort, through whom a commoner wedded a chiefdom and would turn into a chief, the installation loses the zeal of a rite of passage. Without language embedding the chief's death in the chiefdom's flow of fertility, the successor does not submit to a transformation, personally becoming the chiefdom's medicine. Why did the court make these alterations, given that the colonizer did not impose them and probably had little understanding of medicinal rule?

The explanatory value of the DIMA tensor is corroborated by two additional omissions. After the second World War, the chiefdoms of Bukumbi, Ilemera, and Usukuma abolished the installation actions reminding of initiation. They no longer performed the nocturnal seizure of the new incumbent, which likens the chief to the novice of a cult. Furthermore, the ritual companion refrained from formally abusing the chief, despite its importance as ordeal before novice turns into master. Both initiatory elements prevailed in Nassa chiefdom in 1927, which as Tanner's oldest case expectedly more resembled the precolonial situation. In additional contrast, Bukumbi chiefdom dropped the designation of a ritual companion. Since this person's task was to instruct the chief during seclusion, we again observe initiation undermined.

Divination aroused aversion among both colonial administrators and missionaries because of the witchcraft idiom, but we have no indication of them opposing initiation. The liminal passage of a chief as novice does not conflict with the ideology of colonial indirect rule, which was to respect local traditions insofar as they did not vie with European interests. Therefore, an endogenous explanation seems more plausible for the abolished initiation, the same reason used for the aversion to divination. Chiefs and court elders colluding with the colonizer

did not reject the traditional rites as such but specifically the divinatory and initiatory practices because they interpreted the colonizer's wish of absolute or unmediated power in native terms. They replicated the precolonial chief's bid to reach paramountcy through the endogenous logic of the DIMA tensor.

What all Sukuma chiefdoms retained from the precolonial installation were four ritual acts: seclusion, shaving, formal greeting, and private swearing in. Hence, a commoner could enter the royal line of successors and head the association of the dynastic drum, without initiation or divination. Why were these aspects of medicinal rule deserted? Indicative is a discussion that emerged in 1954 during the installation in Usukuma chiefdom bordering Lake Victoria. The new chief did not indulge the "children of the drum." He refused to dance before the drums. He deemed it unseemly for a chief. Tanner (1957:207) attributes the chief's dismissal of the elders' demand to their "installation of a mature man with a mind and beliefs of his own." The explanation I offer, instead of rationality or secularization, rests on the different mode of being. Given that dancing to the drums is what a novice does, in honor of the spirits, I conclude that for this colonial chief the model of power had changed. He did not experience his rule as medicinal, conditional on spirit approval. His power was no longer mediated in that way. The rites turned away from cultic tradition and toward autocracy, here toward administration in service of colonial rule (see supplemental figures).

The cultural change was surprisingly endogenous. In the two cases of chiefdoms in the 1950s tabooing the designation of a girl for the ceremonial night, Christianity undoubtedly played a role, like Tanner suggested. The aforementioned Western tensor opposing tradition and modernity was conveyed in the school curricula of incumbents, many of whom had become educated representatives wanting respect from the colonial authorities. But the chiefs did not decide the ceremonial rules alone. The mostly uneducated courtiers organized the rites. They knew that the ritual mitigation of power during a chief's installation had become obsolete during colonization. Royal initiation and oracular designation were abolished because both the chiefs and the courtiers in their own way had resigned themselves to the European occupation. They did not know that something else was of more concern to the colonizer—the "fetishes" to be amply displayed in ethnographic museums.

Colonization and Tensor Collapse

Officially, any local traditions that threatened social stability could be prohibited or adapted to the colonizer's wishes (Chrétien 2003:272). On closer look, the colonizer censored medicine, such as magic or shrine, on top of divination.

In Rwanda, the missionaries convinced the baptized king Rudahihgwa of abolishing the positions of royal diviner and ritual master and to bury the ancient Imandwa cult of spirit possession, also known as the cult of Ryangombe, or Chwezi (Chrétien 2003:274). Since the 1920s, the annual Muganuro festival organized by the king of Burundi was a Christian ceremony without the original cult objects. It was organized in the mission, defiantly built on the spot where the royal shrine used to be. In the 1980s, Christianization led to the Kabaka of Buganda and his family distancing themselves from people's worship of Lubaale spirits and minimizing the efficacy of their shrine (Ray 1991:151). In Kagera (Bukoba), the Mukama's son burned the main shrine of the Chwezi spirit cult in the name of Christianity, displaying the kind of zest that actually alarmed colonials—specifically, about the rise of Bolshevist aspirations (Chrétien 2003:264). Little did the occupiers know that underneath their exogenous attempts at colonization and Christianization rested a violence that touched a sensitive chord locally, inscribing itself in an age-old cycle whereby autocrats rose up as they controlled or rid themselves of counterbalancing institutions. The chiefs sensed the breach of medicinal rule probably better than did their occupiers.

Of the four institutions of the DIMA tensor, magic seems the least likely to thwart the colonizer's influence. Why then did the colonial king destroy the charm, the object, the "fetish"? And why did precolonial chiefship at the brink of kingship systematically choose another track, keeping the charm, although putting it in service of autocracy (e.g., Kuba *muyum*)? The same tensor underwent two different transformations. In the precolonial evolution toward centralization, endogenous to the tensor, the chief became king by escaping from the dependence on divination and initiation. In the colonial transformation, a revolution forbidding divination as well as magic made the original tensor collapse (see fig. 3, horizontal line in the tensor). Magic was the pivot in the tensor of chiefship, for its disintegration as political basis terminated the system of rule that both Vansina and de Heusch described as an equatorial tradition (see fig. 3, boldface M [magic]).

Why would a split, like an atom torn apart to release energy, be endogenous and a collapse be the exogenous, colonial tendency as in the mentioned cases of Christianization? The first part of the question was tackled in our ethnography delving into the dangerous heat the chief taps from in the forest, which the king exploits to its limits. The next section will evince the commodity logic in the transgression, illustrated by the Kuba king's massive funerary killings deemed a gift to the gods that credits the deceased with proportional blessing. The logic will turn out to be key in interculturally translating the columns split in the tensor—namely, the spheres of "sacrifice" (divination,

Figure 3. Collapsed tensor of colonial kingship. D = divination; I = initiation; M = magic; A = association.

initiation) and "gift" (magic, association). The cultural translation will allow us to answer the second part of the question. Tensor collapse results from the encounter with the tensor of the polity prevailing in Europe and North America, because the latter's dualism of modernity and tradition, which we noted earlier, stimulates purification, opposing the rationality of initiation and association (including hierarchy) to the superstition of oracle and magic (see fig. 3, horizontal line).

Any final analysis of social change should keep in mind that tensor dynamics concentrate on the endogenous basis of change, without excluding exogenous influences. In fact, once the cultural process of tensor collapse took place, a sociostructural play of power could develop. The colonizer's antimedicinal machine dominating public life, including school, religion, media, and universities, associated healing practices and magic with obsolete "fetishes" in ethnographic museums. To retain some authority, the interviewed chiefs with an education had reason to hesitate about admitting the importance of medicine (vs. governance) for their office.

Kuba Kingship: Gifts without Sacrifice

In our definition of kingship as a paramountcy radically more centralized and autocratic than chiefship, the history of the Kuba kingdom in the southwestern Congo Basin is of particular relevance. Again, a split of tensor appears crucial in the centralization of chieftaincy. We spoke of the pivotal figure Shyaam, a once diviner-healer becoming king by subverting the sacrificial elements restraining his rule. He marginalized the dynastic spirit and had a priest in his service bearing the responsibility of the success or failure of the royal medicine. Only village shrines were still linked to a nature spirit, *ngesh* (akin to the western Bantu *nkisi* charm). The village shrine controlled fertility, which the predecessors of kings used to care for.

The DIMA tensor further underwent endogenous pressure to split, as the successors of Shyaam introduced a royal medicine man (*pok ibaan*, "their [charm] pot") who stripped the royal ritualist of authority with a medicine that was nondivinatory. The charm was released of spirit (Vansina 1978:206), which meant that it could do without diviners who communicated whimsical wishes the king should comply with. We notice the evolution toward unmediated power. A magic that was superefficacious because it bypassed the spirit's consent signifies a gift without sacrifice.

The divinatory basis of rule further faded in Kuba history, as the nature spirits of the village were supplanted by a deity, *Ncyeem*. In the eighteenth century, the ninth king Mbop Pelyeeng aNce dissolved all spirit cults in the region (1978:200). On his instigation, the boys' initiation was organized at the capital under the leadership of one of the princes, who kept records of youth demographics. The age-grades and rite of passage were abolished by Kot aPe in 1908. The kingdom reached its peak as a state during the "conspicuous consumption" at funerals that had been innovated to stage the mass killings of hundreds of slaves, supposedly furnishing the deceased noble with servants in the afterlife (1978:181).

The process recalls the Bantu semantic strains of *kul* and *kum*, which in Sukuma society correspond to the distinction between sacrifice and gift, between share (*nsango*) and fame (*lu-kumo*). Unlike a sacrifice, which fulfills a duty (e.g., to the ancestors), a gift changes one's status within the social network (e.g., in alliance, marriage, membership). Since Mauss (1974 [1925]) on the Maori principle of *hau*, we know the word "gift" to fool Westerners, who associate it with presents without ulterior motives. Any gift sooner or later requires a countergift, for it generates an invisible network of debt and credit, as opposed to the domain of sacrifice, where incapacity to offer will not affect one's social status; the responsibility for such failure is mostly shared with clan elders and ancestors.

To describe the funerary killings for the king as human "sacrifice" would suggest that the act, however transgressive, was an offering that complied with a rule and thus fulfilled a duty. But there was no rule prescribing the number or stipulating the extremity of transgression. The murders accumulated capital in the form of indebtedness incurred by the recipient deity. A commodity exchange logic reigned, of investing lives in return for a proportional amount of fortune (e.g., albino murders for magic; Bryceson, Jønsson, and Sherrington 2010). Engaging a calculus of debt and credit, these were not sacrifices but gifts. Moreover, unlike normal gifts, they were purified from their dependence on ancestral or social approval—that is, from their sacrificial side. What the Kuba kingdom at the peak of autocracy exposes is the mode of being that drives centralization: a rigidified logic of social exchange. Humans, including chiefs and diviners, sacrifice. The king does not. The gift (G) without sacrifice (/S) is what characterizes supreme power in egalitarian worlds. Its annotation is /S G.

Anthropological Synthesis: Translating the Tensor

What do we mean by medicine as an endogenous cause in the centralization of power? The equation in terms of gift (G) and sacrifice (S) provides a clue to translate the DIMA tensor and interrelate the four institutions so that it becomes "logical" why divination and initiation conflict with kingship while magic and association thrive under it. Combining the collected data, we have the material to rewrite the DIMA tensor in a culturally appropriate way.

To start with divination, its supplication to the spirits is hoped to be rewarded with a useful oracle. Like in sacrifices to the ancestral spirit, the gift logic is implicit, presuming the recipient will feel obliged to reciprocate. The rooster held up to the sky by the initiation elder yelling "*yingila*!" (It [the spirit] has entered) is also a sacrifice mediated through gift logic: S (G).

A second DIMA component is cultic association. Its principle to climb ranks in return for a fee resembles the commodity exchange of the market. The rank is of a certainty that sharply contrasts with the uncertain promise of ancestral spirits protecting the novice against witchcraft and infertility.

From a sacrifice mixed with gift we shift to a "gift without sacrifice": /S G.

Third, in initiation the participants submit themselves to community and spirits during the ordeal yet without acquiring agency like a client or medium in divination. The initiand's submission is a pure sacrifice, a sacrifice without gift: S /G.

Fourth, magic brings to light the gift-relation, an investment of knowledge of the right substances—still mixed with uncertainty, however. In magic, traditionally, nobody is entitled to a certain outcome. The possible intervention of ancestors and witches makes for the sacrificial part in magic. We thus place the S for sacrifice in parentheses: (S) G.

Each of the four components combine S and G in a unique way. The colonial king differs from the endogenous king in banning the two forms of social exchange above the horizontal division and privileging the two underneath. We referred to this intervention characterizing the European tensor as the polity prism. The rewritten tensor in figure 4 shows what the two practices underneath (I and A) have in common: the slash of purity. Colonial systems, including indirect rule, applied it by tolerating the pure submission of initiation and the pure transaction of titles. Let the chief's head be shaven during installation in the hut of seclusion after which he greets his people, for indeed "the natives" should have their "traditional religion"—in a realm purified of any ulterior gift-like motive. Its counterpart the colonizer accepted too: traditional association insofar as it referred to fixed procedure and the hierarchy of titles with the king ranked on top. The two practices underneath the imaginary line are better known by secularized scholarship as religion and politics. How could such scholarship purifying the political of the religious do justice to medicine?

The colonizer distrusted the upper institutions of the tensor, for these reproduce a state of uncertainty by mixing gift and sacrifice (see S or G remaining between parentheses in the tensor). Oracles and magic pretend to diagnose and remedy but with a rationality and efficacy muddled by the ancestral spirits. The very quality of divination and magic that undermines the autocratic voice is an impurity according to the European tensor. Scholarly reticence about medicine being an independent variable of political process echoes the purified perspective of governance, bound to misconstrue equatorial African kingship.

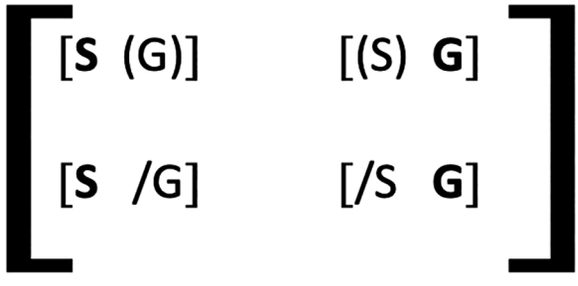

Figure 4. DIMA tensor in terms of gift (G) and sacrifice (S). D = divination; I = initiation; M = magic; A = association.

We find support for the local relevance of the distinction between gift and sacrifice in Bayart's (1993) argument that the economic uncertainty of the African postcolony dramatically increased the leader's need of wealth. Our endogenous cultural explanation, for the region under study, is that an autocrat drew legitimacy from the split tensor privileging *kum*. Similarly, and although unaware of the different lifeworld, white explorers in precolonial villages benefited from the political value attributed to the sign of wealth. However disruptive, the autocracy of a rich man was culturally possible. Kings were dangerous in their unlimited capacity to make gifts and thus to bind subjects, establishing relations akin to that of master and slave. The tensor sums it up by having endogenous kingship separate *kul* from *kum*, the two sacrifice-related practices on the left separated from the two gift-related practices on the right (see fig. 4, letters in boldface). The right column with G in boldface represents the logic of chiefs becoming kings. The colonial perspective, unable to process impurity, has trouble understanding the democratic tenor of divinatory and initiatory rituals and especially its consequence, that any such practice sacrificing the self to grow into a higher status, such as elderhood (*kul*), simply has too little debt/gift-tenor (*kum*) to turn a chief into a king. The chief must leave the sphere of negotiation and multiple consultation typical of sacrifice in hunter groups and in his chiefdom. Like Ndori, he must belittle oracles or make them into sermons of doctrine and governance. He must scorn the very idea of being initiated into medicine like a chief. He must prove to be the hot half of medicine.

At the peak of Kuba kingship, the royal shrine did not require initiation. Its magic worked for the realm unconditionally: such investment yields such return. What Graeber and Sahlins (2017:11) recognized in "the perfection of the king, his court, palace" is in my view this shift toward the strict procedure of kingship and the ceremonial state. The historical frame of reference for a ruler's magic in central and east Africa is the hunter's medicine, which operates according to procedural steps yet always in negotiation with the spirit world. In contrast, the king's violation of an obligation will jeopardize fertility and scorch the land, even justifying regicide. The strict calculus also surfaces in the witch laying claim on someone in function of the credit earned from life-giving, typical examples being motherhood and the bridewealth the family received after the daughter's marriage (Stroeken 2010). The witch is "hot" for transacting life. The king draws on the same purified gift-logic, whose alterity in comparison with the medicinal chief we may fail to notice because of purity's affinity with the type of everyday social exchange that our capitalist society has specialized in. The mantra of "sacred" kingship sounds better to us than our being—through some freak accident—the other's other.

At the birth of kingship, Rwandan lore tells us, emerged Ndori's pendant Ryangombe, the founder of a cult specializing in sacrificial interactions with spirits, comprising divination, cultic initiation, and spirit possession. King and cult parted ways, as did the logics of gift and sacrifice, respectively. Until

then, the chief's medicine ruled, based on fertile exchange with the wild outside, as expressed in the tensor Sukuma adolescents are still initiated in. The king's breach of this animistic lifeworld that he originated from cannot be accounted for by Graeber and Sahlins's (2017:3) claim that "no less in stateless societies than in major kingdoms, the human authorities emulate the ruling cosmic powers." The authors deny the shift that centralization into a monarchy implies. Their additional evidence of universal emulation stating that "shamans have the miraculous powers of spirits, with whom, moreover, they interact" underestimates the extent to which animist interaction differs from kingship. Breaching social exchange, kingship is a freak development in the history of central and east Africa. It is also—contrary to Graeber and Sahlins's (2017:5) assertion—"an endogenous formation."

An Endogenous Cycle of Tensor Collapse among Hunters

We conclude this paper with an intriguing indication of kingship being a mainly endogenous formation on the grounds that a centralization causing tensor collapse, resembling the exogenous path of colonial kingship, has systematically failed to reach a stable condition in the region. Our case in point is the recurring antimedicinal wave and concomitant centralization reported in precolonial hunter societies.

Exogenous explanations have dominated the historical view on witch-cleansing spirit cults in equatorial Africa, presenting the movements as a riposte to colonization (e.g., De Craemer, Vansina, and Fox 1976). I object that the wave of witch-cleansing and charismatic movement since the early twentieth century was prefigured by cyclic local "revolutions," which recall the endogenous dynamic. Mary Douglas (1963:244) observed that her Lele informants from the Congolese rainforest, who traditionally accumulated memberships in various divinatory societies, had experienced since as long as they could remember a spirit-led revolution (reversible, however, since it occurred at the rate of about one or two per generation). In times of exceptionally poor hunting, a regional cult invaded the village to forbid the divinatory societies and the use of any magic. People had to convert to the spirit cult and to its one remedy, which had the particular quality of being infallible. After ritually cleansing the compounds, witchcraft was proclaimed obsolete. Forthwith, any death would be that of a witch violating the prohibition. And witches did not merit burial. After about a year, the centralized rule of the cult would crumble under its internal contradiction of attributing all deaths to rebounded sorcery. Unlikely suspects and the demand of kin in neighboring villages to bury their dead challenged the cult, which did not manage to convert people deeply enough and on sufficiently wide a scale, as typically did Western and Asian kings through their armies and arts. Soon village life returned to normal.

The majority of male villagers had been initiated into various divinatory societies, learning to propitiate omens for successful hunting. In his study among the Ndembu in the southern outliers of the same forest, Victor Turner (1968:178) observed the personal care taken by the hunter for his charm, such as an ascendant's incisor tooth. The invading cult exploited the hunters' sense of obligation while combating magic's animism and oracular mediation. Dogma suddenly controlled people's lives after this breach of the DIMA dynamic prioritizing two practices at the cost of the other two. Why then did the original dynamic regain impetus before the despotism of the cult could lead to a centralized political system in the region? The type of kingship that would have grown from it creates a belief in the monarch by merging total submission (whose cultural roots are initiation) and strict hierarchy (whose cultural roots are association). Graeber and Sahlins, for whom all human power is spiritual, depict a universal king possessing this sacredness that lastingly impregnates the people of the realm. But Bantu-speaking groups have never known such politico-religious conversion possibly characteristic of Euro-Asian history.

The "never" in the last sentence should be rephrased. Colonial and postcolonial interventions have stripped magic and divination of their political relevance to make the DIMA tensor collapse. The tensor's remaining pair of initiation and association, which featured in the aforementioned invading sect, resurged in the form of Pentecostalist redemption and church, respectively, in a region spanning Africa's broad belt of Bantu languages. Or did a new cultural endogeneity emerge in the postcolony that might explain that religious movement? Discerning endogenous causality is an ongoing anthropological endeavor.

Conclusion

Against de Heusch's application of the Frazerian concept of sacred kingship, which recently resurfaced in the volume by Graeber and Sahlins, I have argued, through both a structuralist and an ethnographic analysis of historical change, that sacredness fails to capture the metamorphosis from chief to king in equatorial Africa, because it does not go far enough in integrating the regional experience of power. Magic and ritual reciprocity with the spirits are not crucial in kingship, for they could only seem more of the same to the members of chiefdoms and hunting groups initiated in these very practices.

What distinguishes the king from the chief, quite on the contrary, is an antisacrificial process of centralization that magnifies his medicine and title by radically diminishing his dependence on (ancestral or other) spirits in divination and cultic initiation. Royal power draws on the transgressive "hot" half of magic and on the related gift-based indebtedness of *kum*, ultimately a logic of enslavement, entirely distinct from the natural growth into seniority of *kul*.

A corrected structuralism combining ethnography and comparative historical data on precolonial and colonial societies in central and east Africa results in a tensor (both syntagm and paradigm) of chiefship interrelating the institutions of divination,

initiation, medicine, and association. The meaning of kingship, then, is defined both positively, in the institutions it reinforces, and negatively, in those it weakens. Tensor dynamics of split and collapse distinguish endogenous and exogenous processes of centralization into kingship.

Magic is the tensor's pivot. The gift mixed with sacrifice initiates newcomers into a power named forest-within. Destroy the role of magic, like in the purification by colonial kingship, and the very basis of rule in the region falls apart. Our conclusion will come as no surprise to African cult members shivering at the sight of their charms being exhibited as art in ethnographic museums.

Acknowledgments

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Comments

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In this excellent article, Koen Stroeken proposes a new interpretation of the structural relations and distinctions between chiefs and kings in east and central Africa. Accordingly, chiefs have ruled through the mastering of medicines to the extent that "the ultimate purpose of politics is medicine, comprising magical substances, divination, initiatory ritual, and cult." Yet, the emergence of kingship, with their appetites to centralize power, breached the medicinal rule by reducing the kingship's "dependence on (ancestral or other) spirits in divination and cultic initiation." This is an interesting proposition that nevertheless seems to shift centralization from chiefs to kings, as before the transformation, the chief, (*n*)*kum*(*u*), was the medicine everyone was initiated in. Stroeken's thesis on the role played by medicines as enhancing organizational principles partly resonates with my contemporaneous observations in Gorongosa district (central Mozambique). Healers, diviners, and oracles of all persuasions and individuals structurally located in marginal positions continuously develop new medicines (or new healing practices) or adapt old ones to address diverse bodily and social afflictions (Igreja 2022). Medicines are polysemic and used for healing, protection, and enhancement of power or still for destructive and death projects (Igreja 2018*b*). Thus, it is problematic to present it (medicine) as part of a singular proposition as Stroeken seems to be doing here. Furthermore, there is a productive tension here to explore among the plurality of values of medicines, struggles for power and control, and medicines' limits.

In relation to medicines' limits, the rise and fall of the Gaza Empire or kingdom (1824–1895) in southern Africa offers clues regarding the significance of military skills, prowess in war, and ability to manage multiple and conflicting interests as part of a successful leadership. While it is undisputed, as Stroeken suggests, that we could "reconceive of the political in terms of medicine, the safeguarding of life," it is equally beyond dispute that the ascendence and demise of the Gaza kingdom was not related to the mastering of medicines. War and persecution and a violent colonization unleashed by Sochangana gave birth to the Gaza kingdom. Sochangana was a dissident warrior of the Tchaca Zulu, the Zululand king (today South Africa); he was a courageous warrior chief who rebelled against Tchaca and moved up north (today Mozambique). Sochangana, later called Manicusse, led a powerful army of *Nguni* men, which according to the historian Maria da Conceição Vilhena (1999:27) "devastated, slaughtered and won against any group that mounted resistance." Various indigenous local chiefs in the Mozambican side demanded alliance with the Portuguese forces to defend themselves from the fury and horrors of the Nguni colonization under Manicusse. They assassinated entire villages, stealing people's cattle and imprisoning women and children (Vilhena 1999:17). Manicusse subjugated around 200 indigenous chiefs to establish the Gaza kingdom. Manicusse's army kept moving up north while slaughtering local farmers, capturing women, burning villages, and collecting taxes (Vilhena 1999:28).

When Manicusse died in 1858, two of his sons, Mawewe and Muzila, disputed the succession of the throne. Both got involved in a bitter war that led to the loss and exile of Muzila. Mawewe ascended to the throne of the Gaza kingdom. There are no reasons to dispute that the enthroning of Mawewe involved sacrifices to the deities and the use of special medicines reserved for individuals and families in that position. Yet, the ascendance to the highest leadership position was the result of well-orchestrated war battles, looting of populations, and spread of fear. In turn, the failure over time to maintain that position was due to Mawewe's inability to juggle the multiple and conflicting interests that had animated the everyday life in the kingdom since its foundation. On the one hand, the Boers, Portuguese, French, Italians, and Dutch involved in the hunting of elephants for ivory extraction and searching for gold. On the other hand, the continuities in violent hostilities of Mawewe's forces toward the local chiefs and their populations. Like Sochangana, Mawewe looted and killed foreigners found hunting in his lands; he also continued the violent subjugation of those local chiefs who had good relations with the Portuguese. Thus, when Muzila searched for the Portuguese forces and offered himself and his people to *prestar vassalagem* (to serve) them in exchange for military support to fight his brother Mawewe the Gaza king, the Portuguese did not hesitate. But first Muzila signed the *vassalagem* treaty, and in turn the Portuguese authorities provided military equipment that paved the way for Muzila to wage war and win the throne in 1861. Muzila ruled the Gaza kingdom, and upon his

death in 1884, his son Gungunhana ascended to the throne (Vilhena 1999:36).

What these brief histories, reconstructed through archival documents and letters (Vilhena 1999), show is not a struggle for the centralization or decentralization of the control and management of medicines. It was a ferocious competition among dissidents or descendants of previous rulers for the domination of political power and control of diverse resources: men, women, children, land, animals, minerals, and weaponry. Over time, when King Gungunhana failed in his ability to rule because of excessive and arbitrary violence, nepotism, and defiance over the *vassalagem* treaty signed by his father, it was Gungunhana's mother who plotted with the Portuguese Infantry Captain Mouzinho de Albuquerque to remove her son from power. The removal, which occurred through war, culminated with Gungunhana's arrest and imprisonment in Portugal and the end of the Gaza Empire (Vilhena 1999). Over time, local oral storytellers, often enriched by their imagination, can reduce these complex historical episodes to struggles over control of medicines and their use. Yet, as with the Gaza Empire, as of today in Gorongosa, there is always more than disputes to control medicinal powers and occult forces. Good manners, respect for the living and dead, anticorrupt behavior, and adequate use of medicines are qualities that local populations appreciate in their chiefs (Igreja 2018*a*), while the lack of these attributes can sometimes lead people to collude to oust their chiefs (Igreja and Racin 2013).

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Divine Kingship Is Dead? Long Live Structuralism!

Structuralism has been proclaimed dead for quite some time and so far as I can tell is no longer taught in most anthropology programs except as a historical phase that we have since transcended. In many circles, it would seem almost taboo to invoke it except in scorn. Koen Stroeken's brilliant historical and regional analysis reminds us of what structuralism can achieve. This article on central African political authority is a tour de force, drawing on a breadth and depth of ethnographic, historical, and theoretical knowledge that few scholars today possess.

Most students today seem to be taught that structuralism imposes a homogenous cognitive model of binary opposition on its objects, removing them from history and individual agency and turning cultures into rigid, unchanging crystalline structures. In contrast, I would argue that for structuralist theorists, language and culture are tenuous, flexible, ever-changing affairs, where meaning is dependent on fragile and continuously shifting networks of relations of distinction between signs, maintained only by repeated collective practices. There is no doubt that Lévi-Strauss aspired to universalist conclusions in his more ambitious theories but a close reading of Saussure (Jakobson 1995; Lévi-Strauss 1963, 1974, 2021; Saussure 2011). The core law of structuralism derived from Saussure is that meaning depends on difference—indeed, that there is no inherent identity to things, only an identity built up through recognition of what something is not. I believe structuralism's capacity to undermine deterministic identities while seeking consistent patterns in collective life is worth engaging with, and thus I was quickly intrigued to see what Stroeken would do.

Stroeken describes his structuralist analysis as a kind of pixelized view of society, a loss of finesse and ethnographic detail in favor of pattern recognition. It is an apt metaphor, since pixels are in fact binary representations of a more complex underlying reality, which can be scaled up or down to different degrees of resolution. Stroeken argues for the existence of what he calls a "tensor," a kind of institutional assemblage balancing local concepts of divination, rites of passage, magical arts, and hierarchical networks. There is thus a minimal set of cultural contrasts that mirrors at a much grander scale the sorts of minimal distinctions that exist within a phoneme (the smallest meaningful semiotic unit). For example, the "t" sound in English distinguishes itself along three key axes of articulation—it is not voiced, it momentarily stops the passage of air with the tongue, but the lips remain open. A change in any of these features would be interpreted as another letter by an audience; thus, a "d" is exactly the same except that it is voiced. Stroeken's concept of a tensor is to determine something like a phoneme at the level of key sociopolitical institutional organizations and watch how it plays out across geography and history to look for patterns in how this loose assemblage expresses itself under varying circumstances. If Stroeken is correct, all political authority and even personal advancement in the societies stretching across the central African region are articulated within constellations of these four categories. Each institution's significance depends in this way on their relationship to each other as an institutional logic of power, and thus any cultural change in how these are practiced (whether endogenous or exogenous in origin) shifts the entire structure of power.

A first caveat is necessary here, which is that the strength and weakness of any such regional cross-cultural analysis is in the definition of these terms. For example, is magic a recognizable local institution, and if so, what is the minimal definition? Certainly we are thrown back toward the kinds of critiques Victor Turner (1964) raised of Evans-Pritchard's distinction between sorcery and witchcraft. Nevertheless, readers ought to take a look at Stroeken's (2018) book *Medicinal Rule* before judging the validity of these choices, for there it becomes clear that the conclusions here are built on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork with Sukuma chiefs and ritual initiations as well as more historical and comparative analysis that could not be conveyed in article form. So, if in this short format I sometimes felt very far from the emic nature of these concepts, it is worth giving Stroeken the benefit of the doubt.

Stroeken's argument is that political authority is typically curtailed by its dependence on transcendent spiritual authority embodied by divination and initiation, preserving a more democratic form of society. A point central to Stroeken's claims is that the local model of chiefship is more about acquiring magical knowledge through ritual processes of initiation than sovereignty per se and so cannot be fully differentiated from "medicine." Chiefship is inscribed within an assemblage where other forms of authority weigh in on autocratic rule and prevent it from extending beyond a certain scale: the leader is the healer-in-chief. Larger polities become possible only by "splitting the tensor"—that is, emphasizing magic and hierarchical associations (perhaps more clearly referenced as patron-client ties) while diminishing divination and initiation, which serve to contain chiefly authority. The importance of this for Stroeken is that it demonstrates that kingship was an endogenous innovation that coincidentally sometimes resembled European models of sovereignty rather than something brought by outsiders to the region. Thus, larger polities rose and fell throughout precolonial central Africa according to the ruler's ability to sever his authority from its submission to spiritual forces thought to transcend it.

However, I found myself wishing for more engagement with more of the rich cosmological models of kingship from this region, such as Warnier's (2007) *roi-pot*, MacGaffey's (1986) king as *nkisi* charm, or the more recent work by Guitard (2012) on the chief as trash heap, and if we are seeking an understanding of magic in relation to the state, it is strange not to find a consideration of Geschiere (2000). These models emphasize the materiality of the body of the king as a container for magical force that makes society possible, a force that paradoxically comes from outside the social system and yet blossoms from deep within. Like mana in Lévi-Strauss's famous floating signifier argument, the *ngolo* that flowed from outside society through the king of the Kongo to his chiefs (Ekholm-Friedman 1992), the dirt from the grave that is embedded with the *nkisi* (MacGaffey 1977), and the residual waste pile of the kingdom that guarantees the force of kingship itself (Guitard 2012) all point to that which is outside the structure being the lynchpin that holds it together. Even for the Maka (who reject such hierarchical authority), the *djambe* that allows an elder to be a persuasive and prestigious speaker is the same *djambe* that causes less morally astute persons to devour their own kin in their search for wealth and power, embodied as a nonhuman creature that lives parasitically in the belly of its human hosts (Geschiere 2000). These cosmologies do not conflict with Stroeken's concept of medicinal rule, but engaging these authors would help enrich Stroeken's narrative and give it further explanatory force.

In a second brilliant masterstroke, Stroeken wields the tensor to reveal how the exogenous force of colonialism removed the upper quadrant of DIMA by refusing legitimacy to divination and magic while allowing the institutions of initiation and association. Here I would have liked to know much more. What happens in the transition to postcolonial rule, when the proscription of explicitly magical authority is lifted? Certainly, we know from countless contemporary ethnographies that the postcolonial state becomes entangled in magical practices, hosting state-sponsored witch trials even as key political actors are accused of relying on witchcraft to maintain their power (Ashforth 2007; Blunt 2020; Smith 2005; West 2005). What tensor structure explains these polities structured by European concepts of sovereignty and yet reenchanted by local cosmologies of medicinal rule?

A key aspect of the accumulation of power that transforms chiefs into kings seems to reside in the emphasis of what Stroeken calls "gift" logic as opposed to "sacrifice." I find this story about the centralization of power quite convincing, but the terminology confuses me at times. By "gift," Stroeken refers to relations of indebtedness produced by classic anthropological arguments about reciprocity. In patron-client relationships, kings associate chiefs within their orbit of power through gifts that cannot be reciprocated, centralizing flows of tributary economies in exchange for titles within the king's stratification. Stroeken compares these hierarchy-building exchanges to commodity exchanges in that they resemble purchases of titles, but since gift and commodity have most often served as a key terminological distinction, some more clarification seems necessary.

By contrast, sacrifice in Stroeken's terms is equated with religious tributes that do not induce relations of indebtedness—thus, neophytes make offerings to attain their new ritually produced identities, and divinatory specialists mediate offerings to the oracles who determine truth. In Stroeken's frame, these are not exchanges (they resemble what anthropologists often call the fiction of the "pure" gift). However, Hubert and Mauss (1964) actually argue that sacrifices constitute forms of exchange relationships with the gods to establish relationships of communication and that the only pure gift is god's self-sacrifice (yes, as in Jesus). Sacrifice in a Maussian framework thus remains contractual. And since, following Kopytoff (1971), we cannot necessarily clearly distinguish between an elder and an ancestor, transactions with the spirits should fall in the hierarchical association quadrant of patron-client ties in Stroeken's tensor.

I think that the relationship between Stroeken's DIMA tensor and exchange could be construed productively in relationship to the framework Godelier (1999) lays out in *The Enigma of the Gift*, where he argues against Lévi-Strauss that exchange does not in fact explain everything of kinship but in fact in both exchange theory and kinship theory require the complement of descent. Thus, just as family is about not only the incorporation of affines but the passage of identity through corporeal semiosis, exchange is about not only reciprocity but also those things that are removed entirely from the exchange circuit, thereby anchoring the flowing channels of gifts. The manipulation of the lineal component of kinship was also a key aspect of how African chiefship could consolidate hierarchy into kingship. A central structural component of the kingdom of the Kongo was the incorporation of a chief's matrilineage into the political structure through marriage with the king or his sons, producing patrilineal lines of descent through the

king's children that hierarchically arranged matrilineal segments as well as the distribution of prestige goods. Think also of the passage of Akan chiefship through indexical contact with the stools that were themselves an indexical accumulation of ancestral spirit from all of those who had formerly been ritually seated on it (Sarpong 1967), at once one of Weiner's (1992) inalienable objects par excellence and a direct mediator of ancestral (magical) power (and fittingly for Stroeken's tensor, one must be initiated into having the right to sit on it). In short, I ask whether it might not be productive for Stroeken to incorporate a closer attention to cosmologies of embodiment and materialization of magic, allowing for a richer understanding of how cosmologies of the king as a container or mediator of magical force can be incorporated into the tensor he so creatively articulates here.

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Koen Stroeken is to be congratulated for producing a paper that interfaces magic, democracy, centralization, and African kingship. This paper is particularly insightful in the twenty-first century, where scholars such as Levi Bryant (2011), Graham Harman (2018), Bruno Latour (2005), Isabell Stengers (2010), Latour and Weibel (2005), and others are pushing for the recognition of object-oriented ontologies, for the democracy of objects/expanded democracy, and for cosmopolitics as opposed to cosmopolitanism. In this regard, Stroeken's paper helps contemporary scholars in political anthropology to think through the ways in which magical objects are connected to the democracy of things or expanded democracy wherein objects are not simply objects in the traditional sense of the modernist binary between subjects and objects. Put differently, the paper helps contemporary scholars to think through how magical objects are not passive but are actors in the sense of possessing the vitality and propensity to act in ways that generate democracy. Whereas colonialists dismissed magical objects as fetishes, Stroeken's paper helps resituate magical objects as essential for expanded democracy, particularly in a world where scholars (including the ones mentioned above) are advocating for flat ontologies characterized by decentralization of humans and the democracy of objects where humans and nonhumans are not treated as binaries. In this regard, the paper generates a window of opportunity to rethink and retool political anthropology so that it speaks to contemporary scholarly concerns.

Arguing that kings violate democracy through centralization and sovereignization, through disregarding magic and initiation and depending less on oracular advice, the paper also speaks to contemporary discourses in political anthropology, including discourses around postsovereignty, shared sovereignty, relational politics, animism, and cosmopolitics in which not only humans are recognized as playing politics but nature and magical objects as well. In this way, the author of the paper has to be commended for writing a paper that will be foundational to rethinking the centrality of humans in politics. In other words, Stroeken opens up space for a political anthropology that takes into cognizance questions of heterarchy as postulated by Levi Bryant (2011), critiquing as it does the hierarchization of centralized politics where the king as the big man assumes sovereignty, disregards oracular voices, disregards magical objects that otherwise enhance these chiefly democracies, and then enslaves his subjects via gifts that create patron-client relationships. Put differently, Stroeken's paper shows that whereas kings suffer what Francis Nyamnjoh (2015) calls the illusions and delusions of completeness that make them think they are complete, sovereign, and autonomous, chiefs who depended on magical objects, oracular voices, spirit mediums, forests-within, and initiations were not afflicted by delusions of completeness because they recognized the agency of others—the agency of spirits, of oracular voices, of magical objects, and of the forest-within.

One would have expected, in the development of the paper, a thorough engagement with the underlying assumptions of the paper first. The voices of the African participants would also have been provided on the evolutionary assumptions of the paper. For instance, what did the participants think about the assumptions of evolutionism? In other words, crises in representation lurk, particularly in situations where researchers do not make the underlying assumptions of their work explicit to research participants who provide data of which meanings are invariably transformed when the data are interpreted using assumptions alien to the participants.

Anthropologists have shifted away from evolutionary assumptions that underlie the paper, and so the assumptions of the linear march of time are troubled. Instead of relying on Western assumptions of linear time, participants could have been asked about their own conceptualizations of time, perhaps time as cyclical and repetitive. If, for instance, chiefly families repetitively select one of their own lineages to successively assume chieftainship, this presupposes something other than evolutionism; similarly, if kings become big men and they entrap their subjects in enslaving patron-client relations via gifts, this presupposes something other than evolutionism. At the base of magic and rituals, there are assumptions of cyclicity of time in the status quos, and at the base of patron-client relations, via the gifts, there are also assumptions of cyclicity. In any case, there are differences between time as lived and time as imagined. Evolutionism is about imagining time, but such imaginations of time may be different from actually lived time in Africa.

Last, it would have been interesting to see how the paper connects not only with African magic and democracy but also with modern fetishes and what Bruno Latour (2010) calls factishes—indeed, commodities from a Marxist point of view are fetishized in the contemporary world. The question is how such fetishes impact democracy and democratization in the contemporary era. Indeed, modern science itself is becoming magical in the context of revolutionary technological inventions,

including nanotechnology, biotechnology, and information communication technologies, which are used in revolutionary—and, one might say, magical—medical interventions. One may think of e-health, telemedicine, e-governance, virtual reality, digisexuality, and so on as examples of how modern science is becoming magical in the sense of evading binaries between traditional magic and modern magic and in the sense of evading binaries between what is traditional and what is modern. Indeed, Latour (1993) argues that we have never been modern; even Europeans have never been modern. In this regard, even modern-day kings are magical in the sense of using technological magic in governance. Thus, some modern-day kings may no longer be relying on what Stroeken calls the forest-within but may be relying on what I herein call the "technology-within"; that is, the modern-day kings may no longer be relying on traditional magic but now rely on pieces of equally magical technology that are injected, implanted, or inserted into their bodies. One may think of microchips, nanobots, or nanorobots that are inserted into human bodies to create biology-technology hybrids or cyborgs that are as magical as traditional magic. Magic is still with us and with modern institutions even in the twenty-first century.

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This article is one of the rare pieces published in the last few decades that tries to critique an established consensus on a fundamental research question, in casu the history of sacred kingship in the anthropology of eastern and central Africa. The article's ambitions are testimony to the author's deep commitment with the discipline and with our canon. Stroeken's article has a triple mission: he revisits the Africanist literature and argues that "medicine," defined as "objects and practices believed to have healing, life-giving, or other power," needs to be included in the study of political history in central Africa; he provides a new heuristic tool to think about change and continuity in a cultural region by introducing "the tensor," a new tool to reassess historical developments in a cultural area; and he proposes a novel interpretation of contemporary religious developments in central Africa. Some of the arguments are more fully elaborated in his 2018 monograph *Medicinal Rule: A Historical Anthropology of Kingship in East and Central Africa*.

Stroeken argues that medicine is the basis of chieftancy and status acquisition and that the appearance of kingship and modern politics have ignored this medicinal basis of rule. He wants to upset conventional thinking about leadership and authority in the region. Stroeken argues that colonial and postcolonial interventions "stripped magic and divination of their political relevance to make the DIMA tensor collapse." The "DIMA tensor" refers to the interaction between "divination," "initiation," "magic," and "association" as endogenous bases for power in eastern and central Africa. Political history, then, is the outcome of one or more of these bases losing relevance or being abused. I question the validity of this argument, especially given the fact that the social and cultural acceptance of political leaders, presidents included, depends to a large extent on assumed spiritual affiliations. There is linguistic evidence for this in the Kinois (< Kinshasa) context: the Lingala "*nkisi*" means on the one hand "medicine" but can also mean "fetish" and magical substances that allow people to exert control over others—thus, to rule and govern. If modern politics accept a secular mode of appointment and government, that does not diminish the fact that in Kinshasa and many other central and eastern African communities, "real power" and status is said to draw on magical interventions and spiritual relations. In Kinshasa, rumors circulate about Pentecostal pastors who jettison (demonize) ancestral authority in church, but many agree that they nevertheless draw their influence and power from pacts made with the ancestors and mediated through sorcerers. Many Kinois make a distinction between modern politics on the public stage and the "real" governance and rule. They consider the first merely to be a charade, a masquerade. While for most Kinois, the real power is located in the invisible world, and it is democratic: anyone can visit a magician. The secularization that Stroeken mentions—and that has led to modern politics—is, at least in the Kinois context, not total.

Perhaps the most challenging proposal of this article is methodological—and it has the potential to bring in a totally different method of studying local cultures. He has reconstructed "a tensor," an algebraic object that describes a multilinear relationship between sets of algebraic objects related to a vector space. It helps him to make sense of the importance of various cultural institutions, ideas, and objects in a region's history. In contrast to a vector or a matrix, tensors comprise various relationships, where each can be influenced by other processes and can thus lead to new social, political, and economic constellations. Social change, then, Stroeken argues, is based on the "tensor effect."

For Stroeken, "the tensor, however, holistically characterizes history, identifying the recurring relations of ideas and practices in a society as well as their changes." It has "historical depth and region-wide significance" and can "provide explanations for which the history of a single community cannot account." Throughout the article, there is a tension between cultural essentialism and constructionism. I do not think Stroeken wants to revive cultural essentialism, especially because the tensor can easily split—as he shows in his case studies. And this "split" can lead to new political phenomena that disregard the "essential"/"endogenous" forces.

Drawing on his own ethnographic observations—especially minimal frustrations and grudges expressed in the margins of a ritual but also on ethnographic writings, academic literature, and a wide array of primary materials collected by other scholars (among others recorded songs)—Stroeken considers the tensor of the central African region the "forest-within," drawn from a medicinal bundle (*bu ya mu kaya*) used in initiation rituals. The

tensor converges divination, initiation, magic, and association. Yet idiosyncrasies, and also external events such as colonization and Christianization, can lead to novel political constellations. Political centralization is one of these novel political forms that counter the endogenous basis of chieftancy and status acquisition.

The main question is how to know that the tensor in eastern and central Africa is built on only four elements. What if a fifth entity contributed to the tensor dynamics? What about physical prowess (which, e.g., in several central African communities has led to the figure of "the big man") has allowed for leadership, influence, and prestige? In contemporary Kinshasa, the ideal of the "*moto ya makasi*," the strong man, or the fighter remains significant, even to the extent that Pentecostal pastors portray themselves as fighters against the devil during their sermons and other performances, clenching their fists, warming up as getting ready for a physical fight, and sometimes giving air punches, as if attacking an invisible other. Fighters (wrestlers, martial arts practitioners, etc.) also draw on "medicine" (*poussière* in Kinshasa), which increases their endurance and the accuracy of their punches and even intimidates their adversaries spiritually. Does Stroeken consider the fighter as a "chief," or is physical prowess a fifth basis of the tensor for power?

Stroeken draws on distinctions between "postcolonial interventions" and "a new cultural endogeneity in the postcolony." Some more explanations about the postcolonial interventions that impact power dynamics in contemporary central Africa are warranted, especially given the fact that the emergence of Pentecostalism seems on the one hand a "postcolonial intervention" (because of coming from outside the African continent); but Stroeken also presents Pentecostalism as a reemergence of the second half of the tensor (i.e., initiation and association). To the defense of Stroeken's argument, the third rubric of the tensor is present in Pentecostal thought as well: magic (insofar as miracles are similar to magic). As such, Stroeken's theory seems to provide another, more "endogenous" explanation for the easy adoption (and adaption) of Pentecostal thought and practices in central Africa. However, how then to explain the appeal of Pentecostalism elsewhere in the Global South? Are the building blocks of tensors in western Africa then the same? How does this emphasis on the endurance of "endogenous forces" sit with the observation of more widespread cultural and political phenomena? Does this mean that the "endogenous basis" has a more universal ground? This thought-provoking piece deserves to be brought into the discussion about globalization, modern political history, and decolonization of social sciences.

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Endogenous State Formation in Central Africa?

For decades, Professor Stroeken has entertained a profound and comprehensive fieldwork relationship with a Tanzanian society. This has led to several splendid books (Stroeken 2000, 2010, 2018). On that basis, his recent *Current Anthropology* contribution seeks to explain (cf. Stroeken 2018) the local process of state formation by an appeal to endogenous forces peculiar to that context, especially the centrality of healing as a royal attribute.

Such a strategy has been popular among Africanists in recent decades (it is chided in van Binsbergen 2019): given the wrongs that the world has inflicted on Africa and Africans in recent millennia and to avoid further hegemonic violence, things African must be explained by reference to African conditions, rather than to transcontinental factors.

The idea of endogenous dynamics also finds support from a different angle unaffected by African sensitivities: dominant approaches in archaeology such as Renfrew's Cambridge School abhor the idea of transregional/transcontinental continuities, preferring to explain change from regional conditions—Renfrew (1972) has applied such a model to Aegean archaeology and even designed specific mathematics therefore (Renfrew and Cooke 1979).

In principle, contemplation of endogenous factors is pertinent in state formation. In cultural history worldwide, states have only a shallow history (a handful of millennia, against the ca. 4,000 millennia of human existence). The earliest states (in ancient Egypt, the ancient Near East, the Indus Valley, Shang China, Meso America) must have sprung from a constellation of factors, among which endogenous ones were probably important; is there a prima facie reason why such endogenous factors could not have played a comparable role in sub-Saharan Africa?

Stroeken's appeal to magic and healing is well taken, in that it reminds us of modalities of conceptualizing the state (Althusser 1976 [1970]; Cassirer 1961 [1946]; Durkheim 1912; Geschiere 1986; Gramsci 1975; Taussig 1997) in which not political institutions in the narrower sense—structures of management, representation, extraction, redistribution, oppression—but *ideological* mechanisms bring subjects to submission to the invisible, transcendent entity that the state invariably amounts to. "Ideological state apparatuses" including magic and healing largely and effectively reinforce the state, for they obscure the essential violence at the heart of any state from the participants' consciousness.

Against the mystique of the state, it is sobering to point to a number of simple and firm material conditions (also cf. Doornbos and van Binsbergen 2017). A state cannot exist in vacuo, since it cannot (cf. Huxley 1945 [1932]) reproduce by its own means the humans that fill its institutions and constitute its subjects; hence, both conceptually and historically, state formation implies an absolute and defiant departure from "the kinship order"—that is, from the premises of sociability, kinship, production, and nonviolence that inform most prestate village communities worldwide (van Binsbergen 2001, 2003). Moreover, for a state to be possible, we need major surplus production to support the—nonproductive and exploitative—state apparatus and its personnel. Whether such surplus may be

realized depends on further material and cultural factors: ecology (African surface soils are the oldest and most depleted in the world, and the rare and ephemeral nature of state formation in sub-Saharan Africa should be seen in this light), modes of production (hunting and gathering constituted the default mode of production of humanity throughout its long history except since the Neolithic (12 ka BP) rise of food production through agriculture and animal husbandry; there are no indications that before the Neolithic enough surplus production toward state formation was possible), storage and transportation (if a state is to persist over time and maintain a certain territorial extension, the surplus must be transmittable in space and time, which again points to (post-)Neolithic conditions), and a logocentric cultural context (the early states mentioned existed in a cultural environment also characterized by the other elements of the logocentric [Derrida 1967] package: writing, priest-organized religion, and protoscience).

Against this background, the prospects for independent state formation in sub-Saharan Africa on the basis of totally endogenous dynamics look very dim indeed. Yet I cannot deny that the idea is tempting, given the localizing pressures (Fardon 1990) in classic anthropology. A fieldworker makes a huge investment in learning local conditions, relationships, language, and culture and wants to get maximum mileage in return. Fieldwork as the paradigmatic strategy toward valid intercultural knowledge implies that, subjectively, one's active interpretative horizon is myopically restricted in space and time.

In my own older studies on South Central African state formation (van Binsbergen 1981, 1992, 2012), reliance on endogenous dynamics constituted a perspective that was not even problematized—and that won me praise from the nestor of South Central African historical studies, Vansina (1993)—even though he contested my designation "states" for the political units emerging in the region after 1500 CE. However, when I spent a year in the Workgroup on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, 1994–1995), my eyes were opened: the oral traditions that I had interpreted (along with my African interlocutors) as recent and local contained numerous scraps of stray (but unmistakable) elements from ancient Egypt, the ancient Near East, and South and Southeast Asia (van Binsbergen 2010). My fieldwork blinkers had prevented me from seeing the long-range, transcontinental picture. The states I had assumed to emerge from a regional dynamics were in fact predicated on much older prototypes thousands of kilometers away. In general, it appears that, worldwide, most states owed their emergence to their region being plugged into the world system of trade, especially in gold, cattle, and slaves. Only recently did I find (van Binsbergen 2019, 2020) concrete indications of Mediterranean and of South, East, and Southeast Asian inroads into South Central Africa during the Common Era. Not endogenous dynamics but diffusion and stimulus invention (Kroeber 1940) were the factors I had missed. Against this background, I read Professor Stroeken's text with different eyes.

Reply

Can American politics be understood without the secularization process opposing conservative and progressive ideals? This paper asked a similarly ambitious question about an African region where closely related (Bantu) languages are spoken: do they have a widely socialized ideal of power affecting politics, more exactly tempering centralization? The validity of identifying an endogenous factor in Africa (no less seminal than secularization in Europe) stems not from one indicator but from the totality of seven. That is my first reply to Wim van Binsbergen's dismissal of the search for endogeneity in the rise and fall of African kingdoms.

The tension between "medicine" and "governance" surfaced in the interviews with chiefs, but I also found evidence in actual practices, whose principles seemed partly unconscious and therefore invited structuralist analysis. Participation as ethnographer in initiations led me to specify medicine in terms of four interrelated practices by which the initiated safeguard their autonomy. Pointing to the same "tensor" were linguistic data and a possible solution to the debate between Vansina and de Heusch. Most importantly, actual cases of precolonial centralization into kingship confirmed medicine, in its comprehensive meaning, to be pivotal, and so did three case studies of cultural adaptation after exogenous colonial intervention (nonmagical kingship and enthronement, religion breaking the witch-finding cycle). The seven indicators and their coherence together constitute the thesis to refute.

Second, endogeneity does not exclude exogenous influence but compels the diffusionist to identify within the cultural adoption what made the influence locally successful. In the case of a distant common origin, such as the Egyptian prototype of kingship in an older world system of trade advanced in van Binsbergen's recent work, the question shifts to deciding what a similarity means between institutions thousands of miles apart. Braudel had reason to treat the *longue durée* as a history of its own. In the long range, an exogenous origin of institutions is all too likely. Endogeneity, which implies a cohering with the rest of the cultural system, is always relative to a certain place and time. That is why a colonial intervention can be called exogenous and culturally disruptive instead of merely part of that place at that time.

A ceteris paribus approach may give the wrong impression of a "total" explanation and—point taken—runs the risk of in vacuo analysis. However, given the emphasis in the literature (e.g., Vansina's oeuvre) on the material conditions of state formation, surely the vacuum must be the cultural contexts that the literature failed to systematize. Depleted soils hamper state formation, but so does erratic medicine that raises the autonomy of commoners. Yes, the "logocentric package" of writing, priest-organized religion, and protoscience has lubricated the centralization of power in many parts of the world, but in a large region of Africa it now turns out that the same effect was attained (nonlogocentrically) by defusing the institutions of

divination and initiation that in their various forms kept the chief's power in check.

Victor Igreja objects that the putatively chief-defining element—medicine—has both healing and destructive purposes. Chiefs know both uses too, so this does not refute the thesis; what would, in my view, is if chiefs were mainly wise leaders without medicine. During colonial times, many portrayed themselves as such. I consider this a cultural shift and can make this comparative claim precisely thanks to the ethnographically derived tensor. The polysemic, which Victor stresses, should not preclude a delimited set of relations that "medicine" stands for, with "magic" being one relation. I will come back to the issue.

Igreja's case study illustrates the primacy of military skill over medicine in the rise of the Gaza Empire. The role of material conditions in conquest and ascendance to leadership cannot be denied. My emphasis, however, is on the rise of a different political structure. Confirming the split of the tensor, Nguni centralization and conquest began as initiation was no longer a spiritual experience and subjecting all, including the chief, but was instrumentalized to establish regiments (Chanaiwa 1980). So, unless Soshangana (who came from Shaka's Zulu nation) installed a centralization fundamentally different from the Nguni polity, the Gaza Empire extends my thesis toward the south of the concerned region, wherefrom Nguni groups had actually migrated.

Magic and Political Legitimation

A major challenge is to understand the emaciated form of medicine among this region's kings. They still have "magic" in the classic anthropological sense (which is where I situate *nkisi* mentioned by Katrien Pype) and they classify people into ranks, but they instrumentalize oracles and initiations. Therefore, I conceive of the precolonial state as magical yet medicinally split. The latter is not the same as secularized. To respond to Pype's query about seeing the continuity of this model today, a difficulty is the Euro-American pigeonholing of divination and initiation together with magic as religious (e.g., Ellis and ter Haar 2009), which obscures their specific roles in politics.

Pype's proposal of a fifth element, and her choice for physical prowess in particular, is riveting. It is based on her fieldwork among Congolese youth. My ethnographically based choice has been not to give primacy to bodily strength. Together with skills such as governing and wisdom, I situate strength outside *kum*—namely, in *kul*, where seniority, growth, and life force belong. According to my data, these traits do not single out chiefs, which leads me to speculate that discourse placing the chief as big man on top in function of skill or even life force is a legitimation ex post facto, like divine support in European kingdoms. The inverse legitimation posited by Igreja (magic being the veneer of skill) would have unnerved me profoundly were it not so hard to imagine, since medicine is what Sukuma farmers are initiated in. In dance competitions, the bodily skills and creativity are mentioned but the winner is decided by the quality of the magic attracting the largest crowd. Of course, skills and strengths differ and make armies win or lose, but this physical part was not the essence of the power initiations I observed. Neither did the life force of participants seem to matter: it was not assessed or trained, contrary to my expectations (given my culture of carefully updated rankings of individuals in sports, science, etc.).

I agree with Pype that the medicinal tensor has relevance for contemporary politics. For one thing, the current states in the region that historically were populated mainly by chieftaincies such as Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, and Zambia have not exhibited the unequivocally autocratic sort of leadership found among those with long-term dominance of kingdoms, such as "Ruanda," "Kongo," and "Buganda" after which the countries were named. Is this a bold claim? That I could make it without defying the discipline's canon is telling for the path in cultural research that anthropology has deserted. I for one do not consider it too late to go back on the decision and explore overgrown paths without losing contact with the discipline's main road.

As Artwell Nhemachena underlines, it is a fine line to walk. Which path should get a second chance? The evolutionist frame really has had its day (an evolution I might say). As ever, we should be careful about surface resemblances. Do terms differentiating levels of political centralization, such as chiefship and kingship, smack of an evolutionist framework? It depends on the use of terms. They would smack of it in case kingship is seen as the necessary step in the evolution of a chiefdom. Yet, as I argued, this very centralization is not "logical," culturally speaking. To see kingship as a freak event, contrary to Euro-American assumptions about the political, seems to me an advance, and one in the name of the chiefships concerned, as Artwell subtly remarked. My wish indeed was to let culture speak. By culture I do not mean the (surveyed) sum of local opinions but something partly unconscious to be experienced again and again through fieldwork and for which interviews with the chiefs are just one tool. True, I could have opened up more to their concepts of time, which for some chiefs clearly was not linear history. But could such account still speak to our discipline's ingrained assumptions and effectively tackle these? Think of the marvelous flare that the ontological turn lit up and the difficulty to integrate it into the discipline. Much of the complexity of my analysis follows from the attempt to translate observed patterns into Euro-American terms without giving up the local semantic relations. The analytical tenor of the word I used for the tool reminds us of the inevitable tentativeness.

Situated Structuralism

After evolutionism, should we also desert structuralism once and for all? Nhemachena's object-centered argument illustrates the potential of a framework for which Lévi-Strauss, and with him our whole discipline, was once famed across the human sciences. Structuralism inspired philosophers, psychotherapists, writers, filmmakers (de Heusch himself), and artists alike because in it the difference between thing and thought did not

matter anymore. In the field of relations, they occupy the same place (see Newell 2018). Thus a film, book, and song could be kindred souls. A magical concoction and bride wealth are both gifts with a sacrificial dimension. They fill in that spot in the tensor. The periodization missing in the old framework became the starting point of my analysis. Obviously, the more phenomena occupy the same spot, the less their situatedness appears. For the implacable phenomenologist Latour, situatedness is everything. His network of actants is a lateral field of connections and collisions without higher-order logics, which to structuralists is precisely what humans make inventions from and alter or even revolutionize the field with. Are the two approaches irreconcilable? To explain events, the one sees impact between impregnable actants, the other notices their underlying belonging (tensor).

After an in-depth summary, Sasha Newell tests the limits of the tensor, whose Saussurian principle he did well to recap: "there is no inherent identity to things, only an identity built up through recognition of what something is not." *Kum*-power, chiefly healer-fame, is determined by what it is not: *kul*-power, respected seniority and growth. Relations are valued over concepts, which as floating signifiers are ambivalent. How can *djambe* comprise both the magic the Maka chief boasts and the witchcraft that jealously kills kin? The concept is the same, but its meaning has shifted. "Context!" is the inevitable reply, but do the contexts, or "situations," not recur and relate to each other?

Take the distinction between gift and sacrifice. Rather than excluding Mauss's view that the sacrifice to ancestors is contractual and thus a gift, the distinction allows us to identify the situations when an act called sacrifice is a gift, structurally speaking. The analysis consistently refers to a set of relations in terms of which practices, ideas, and events are compared. Ethnography has the first and last word in determining the set. The distinction is replaced by a more complex structure as soon as the ethnographer encounters, for instance, cases of complementarity between *kum* and *kul* power. Also, the latter pair's correspondence with Godelier's exchange and descent, respectively, in response to Newell's suggestion, appears only thanks to the initially defined semantic set.

Newell and Pype dare me to apply the tensor to postcolonial polities. There, I submit, the original tensor has to be deserted, for during colonization it "collapsed." European centralized power emptied out magic during those decades. The reenchantment of postcolonial sovereignty brought a magic quite different from the one that people were initiated in (Stroeken 2011). Seminal scholarship on the postcolonial state, which the paper started with, has systematically underestimated the resulting gap between the state and the network of initiatory traditions and healing systems. The tensor offers a basis for comparison.

—Koen Stroeken

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