

The Meaning and Role of a King in Africa

This is an excerpt from one of the most important books about early African government, written by the Senegalese historian and scientist, Cheikh Anta Diop.

(from Pre-Colonial Black Africa (1964))

The Significance of Royalty

The African universe was run in a strictly ordered manner, metaphysically speaking. The works of Marcel Griaule, Germaine Dieterlein, and Father Tempels revealed these fundamental ideas to the West.

According to Tempels, the Universe was ruled by only one set of hierarchic forces: every being, animate or inanimate, could occupy only a specific place according to his or its potential. These forces were cumulative: thus, a living being who had as talisman the fang or claw of a lion, in which the vital force of the animal was concentrated, increased his own power by that much. In order to overcome him in battle, one had to have a sum of forces greater than his own plus the lion's. Therefore, the struggle between two kings was, above all, a magic struggle on the level of these vital forces; it took place long before the physical combat in the arena, around the water jugs and libation stumps set up on the ground, during the night in the sacred groves. We can be sure that, from the beginning of African history until the conquest by the West, each traditional king before going into combat indulged in these practices, and therefore firmly believed that victory was on his side. Islamization did not change this: it just displaced the center of interest. Instead of turning to the traditional priests who mediated between them and the hidden forces of the universe, the princes now went to Muslim clergy, the marabouts who practiced the Eastern Kabbalah and gave them grigris to assure their victory.

This metaphysics, far from constituting a minor fact in African historical sociology, was a predominant trait. If scientific explanation ignores it, all that it will grasp will be lifeless, external forms with no apparent logical connection. No one has revealed the internal logic of this African society better than Marcel Griaule, as has been pointed out by Andre Leroi-Gourham and Jean Poirer:

"All work and human activities... remind us of universal movement: pottery, cattle breeding, dance, music, decoration, and particularly the prestigious art of the forge - the Monitor was a blacksmith - the rhythm of the bellows and anvil of which inspired the first dance. The world is ordered like a vast equation; human animation corresponds to the animation of nature, and each gesture extends back to its mythical precedents. The Black African world which seemed to some so simple is simple indeed, but only because of its internal logic. It is very complicated in appearance; creation takes on a sense that can be called philosophical. The Black Universe had seemed crude; it now turns out to be profoundly elaborate."

Within the framework of this universal harmony, in which each being has his place, the king has a precise function, a definite role: he must be the one with the greatest vital force in the whole kingdom. Only in this way can he serve as mediator - he being sacrosanct - with the superior universe, without creating any break, any catastrophic upheaval within the ontological forces. If he is not a legitimate king, fulfilling these exact conditions of established filiation, and appointed according to the rites of tradition, all of nature will be sterile, drought will overtake the fields, women will no longer bear children, epidemics will strike the people. As long as the tradition was carried on in isolation from external influences, the king fulfilled a function in which no usurper could replace him. The obligations were strict and the succession to the throne was practically without incident, as we have seen among the Mossi. The council which convened to invest the

king (Moro Naba) in reality examined the degree of legitimacy of the different claimants: it was not actually an election - the term is improper - for they were compelled after a thorough examination of each case to appoint, not according to their preferences, but in accordance with tradition, the one who had all the requisite qualities.

Along the same lines, when the level of vital force of even a legitimate king decreased, he was put to death, either actually as was apparently the case in the beginning, or later on, with evolution, symbolically. This was the general practice in Black Africa and ancient Egypt, where the symbolic execution coincided with the festival of Zed. By this means, the king was supposed to die and be born again, revitalized; he regained the vigor of his youth, he was once again fit to rule. This same practice is found among the Yoruba, Dagomba, Tchamba, Djukon, Igara, Songhai, Wuadai, Hausa of the Gobir, Katsena, and Daoura, the Shillucks, among the Mbum, in Uganda-Ruanda, in what was ancient Meroë.

In Cayor, a king could not rule when wounded, probably because his vital force was thus decreased. In any case, it was said that it would bring bad luck to the people. The king, and all those who assumed high responsibilities, whether temporal or spiritual leaders, were considered ep bop (having more head, in the metaphysical sense). That meant that those who might go against their will, or who tried to contest their authority, might go mad as a result.

The king is truly guarantor of the ontological, and therefore the terrestrial and social, order. It is remarkable that not one African constitution provided for his replacement during the interregnum following his death for the maintenance of material order: whenever the throne was vacant, whatever the reason, social anarchy descended upon the people. The prisons were emptied among the Mossi, without any representation of law intervening to oppose it. The situation was identical, perhaps worse, in Songhai, even though it was Islamicized. The *Tarikh es Sudan* reports that Askia El-Hadj (ascended on August 7, 1582) had Mohammad Benkan imprisoned at Kanato on the advice of Amar-ben-Ishaq-bir-Askia. The three sons of Benkan - Bir, Kato, and Binda - stayed in hiding through the entire reign of El Hadj and that of Bano, his successor. But they took advantage of the interregnum between the death of Bano and the accession of Askia Ishaq II, to come out of hiding with impunity and do everything they could to kill Amar, who was responsible for their misfortunes. The latter, warned in time, disguised himself in order to escape certain death, which would have gone unpunished. But he shed his disguise immediately after the crowning of the new Askia, "for, the disturbed situation having come to an end, no one could then commit an act of aggression against another."

Most assuredly, in Songhai this was a vestige of a religious past, the death of which had not yet been fully incorporated into the existing institutions. The ontological function of the king had not yet been forgotten. Under the Moroccan occupation, Pasha Ali ben 'abd-el-Kader on June 19, 1632, launched a surprise attack on the city of Gao; he was defeated by the inhabitants, who seized his treasure and his wife. They also captured Prince Benkan, the descendant of the Askias, who accompanied him. However, the latter was treated with much respect, "and the people of Gao asked him to come and live amongst them, so they might then obtain the blessings of heaven."

The Obligations of the King

The Fondoko Borhum, "Lord of the Macina" (1610) thought that any person invested with royal authority was the servant and shepherd of his people.

Although the major figure of his country, the king was therefore no less obliged to lead a life strictly regulated by custom. Among the Mossi, his schedule was planned down to the slightest details. The Moro Naba did not have the right to leave Ouagadougou, his capital, not because of royal pride, but because ritual forbade it; that is no longer true today, as traditions are beginning to fade. However, the Mossi emperor Nassere, who laid siege to Ghana and fought against Sonni

Ali and Askia Mohammad, must have broken this rule because of the great danger which menaced his kingdom. Indeed, he is said to have directed in person the expedition against Ghana.

It may also be that this tradition is recent and was instituted only at the height of the Mossi empire.

The life of the Kaya-Magha of Ghana was as strictly governed by tradition as that of the Pharaoh of Egypt; each morning, he rode around his capital on horseback, followed by his entire court, preceded by giraffes and elephants, according to Idrisi. Anyone who had a complaint could at that time address him and submit his case, which settled on the spot. In the afternoon, he traveled the same route alone, and no one was allowed to speak to him. These kings were sometimes so conscious of their role that they tried in every way to maintain contact with the people, to investigate grievances directly, so as to feel its political and social pulse, whatever the cost. Thus, the Moro Naba disguised himself at night and went through the lower-class neighborhoods of his capital in absolute anonymity, listening to conversations. So did certain Damels of Cayor, but it must be recognized that they did this as a ruse, to sound out public opinion for personal reasons: to safeguard their power and prevent palace revolutions in this climate of dynastic rivalry, they had to keep constantly informed.

However, the concept of royalty in Diara or Kaniaga in Termes region, not far from Upper Senegal, was rather original. The king was obligated to remain in his palace and never leave it. He was surrounded by no pomp at all. Apparently, the people paid very little attention to him, not out of disdain but because they felt a king was great enough in himself not to need all these external signs of majesty.

The traditional kings thus governed with minimal constraint, except for such administrative abuses as were committed by civil servants, which will be discussed in chapter VIII. The tax system they established appeared not as exploitation, but as part of one's goods and crops that ritual decreed must be turned over to the sacrosanct authority who linked the two worlds, so that order might be maintained in the universe and nature continue to be fulfilled.

Actually, the historical reality is less sublime: this almost divine order of things must have begun to degenerate from the very start. The description given above reflects an ideal situation which was not always realized because of the need for an administration dependent on an army of civil servants. But in either case, the evolution of the system never gave rise to a revolution. Ghana probably experienced the reign of a corrupt dynasty between the sixth and the eighth centuries. Kati tells of an extremely violent revolt of the masses against it. The members of that dynasty were systematically massacred. In order to wipe it out completely, the rebels went so far as to extract fetuses from the wombs of women of the royal family. Yet this did not constitute a revolution, for the monarchy itself was not eliminated; it was apparently not even seriously questioned.

Ancestry was matrilineal: the emperor Kanissa-ai, contemporaneous with the prophet Mohammad in the sixth century, had chosen as his capital not Ghana, but Koranga, the native city of his mother.

The practice of matriarchy from the beginning in the royal succession is an important argument against those who support the theory that Ghana might have been founded by Semites, for the latter recognized only patrilineal filiation.

Whatever our present attitude toward this metaphysics of social positions, this ontology, for more than two thousand years ruled in an absolute manner the minds and consciences of our ancestors: it explains, to a certain extent, their failure or success when confronted with the tasks of civilization. This is why it cannot be too minor a factor in the historical explanation; we cannot fail to consider it.