
ASA Monographs 36

Titles available:

24 Reason and Morality

Edited by Joanna Overing

29 Anthropology and Autobiography

Edited by Judith Okely and Helen Callaway

30 Contemporary Futures: Perspectives from Social Anthropology

Edited by Sandra Wallman

31 Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice

Edited by C. M. Hann

32 Environmentalism: The View from Anthropology

Edited by Kay Milton

33 Questions of Consciousness

Edited by Anthony P. Cohen and Nigel Rapport

34 After Writing Culture

Edited by Allison James, Jenny Hockey and Andrew Dawson

35 Food, Health and Identity

Edited by Pat Caplan

The Anthropology of Power

Empowerment and disempowerment
in changing structures

Edited by Angela Cheater



London and New York

First published 1999
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© 1999 ASA; individual chapters, the contributors

Typeset in Bembo by
BC Typesetting, Bristol
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Creative Print and Design (Wales), Ebbw Vale

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-19388-5 (hbk)
0-415-19389-3 (pbk)

Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
1 Power in the postmodern era	1
ANGELA CHEATER	
2 Empowering ambiguities	13
WENDY JAMES	
3 The discursive space of schooling: on the theories of power and empowerment in multiculturalism and anti-racism	28
DANIEL YON	
4 'Father did not answer that question': power, gender and globalisation in Europe	42
SIGRIDUR DUNA KRISTMUNDSDOTTIR	
5 The reach of the postcolonial state: development, empowerment/disempowerment and technocracy	57
RICHARD WERBNER	
6 The guardians of power: biodiversity and multiculturalism in Colombia	73
PETER WADE	
7 The dialectics of negation and negotiation in the anthropology of mineral resource development in Papua New Guinea	88
COLIN FILER	

8 Land and re-empowerment: 'The Waikato case'	103
NGAPARE K. HOPA	
9 Indigenisation as empowerment? Gender and race in the empowerment discourse in Zimbabwe	118
RUDO GAIDZANWA	
10 Exploitation after Marx	133
ROBERT LAYTON	
11 Evading state control: political protest and technology in Saudi Arabia	149
MADAWI AL-RASHEED	
12 Authority versus power: a view from social anthropology	163
PETER SKALNÍK	
13 Speaking truth to power? Some problems using ethnographic methods to influence the formulation of housing policy in South Africa	175
ANDREW SPIEGEL, VANESSA WATSON AND PETER WILKINSON	
14 Machiavellian empowerment and disempowerment: the violent political changes in early seventeenth-century Ethiopia	191
MANUEL JOÃO RAMOS	
<i>Index</i>	206

Contributors

Madawi Al-Rasheed (PhD Cantab) is Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (King's College, University of London) and the author of *Politics in an Arabian Oasis* (I.B. Tauris, 1991) and articles on Saudi Arabia's history, society and politics. She has recently worked on ethnicity and migration among Arab communities in London.

Angela Cheater (PhD Natal) has recently taken early retirement from the chair of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Waikato. She has published numerous papers and books, mostly on issues of development in Zimbabwe, but including *Social Anthropology: An Alternative Introduction* (Unwin Hyman, 1989).

Colin Filer (PhD Cantab) has taught anthropology and sociology at the universities of Glasgow and Papua New Guinea, and is currently Head of the Social and Cultural Studies Division of the PNG National Research Institute. Most of his recent publications deal with the social impact of the mining industry and social context of forest policy in PNG.

Rudo Gaidzanwa (MA, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague) is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Zimbabwe. She has published extensively, particularly on gender issues, including her book *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (College Press, 1985).

Ngapare K. Hopa (DPhil Oxon), who served on New Zealand's Waitangi Tribunal (1989-92), has recently become Professor of Maori Studies at the University of Auckland, having also taught in California and at the University of Waikato. Her research interests and most of her papers focus on property rights, settlement issues and urban Maori.

Wendy James (DPhil Oxon), fellow of St Cross College, author of numerous books and papers in the history and anthropology of north-east Africa (including *The Listening Ebony*, Clarendon Press, 1988), and editor of *The Pursuit of Certainty* (Routledge, 1995), is now Professor of Social

Anthropology at the University of Oxford. She has acted as consultant to the United Nations on displaced communities in the Sudan and Ethiopia.

Sigrídur Duna Kristmundsdóttir (PhD Rochester, New York), formerly Member of the Icelandic Parliament for the Feminist Party (1983–7), has been Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Iceland since 1990. She has published articles in both Icelandic and English, and *Doing and Becoming: Women's Movements and Women's Personhood in Iceland 1870–1990* (University of Iceland, 1997).

Robert Layton is Professor of Anthropology at Durham University. His books include *The Anthropology of Art* (Cambridge 1981/1991), *Uluru: An Aboriginal History of Ayers Rock* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1986) and *An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge, 1997).

Manuel João Ramos (doctoral studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris; PhD Hons Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa) is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa, Lisbon, Portugal. His publications are mainly on historical anthropology, including his book, *Ensaio de Mitologia Cristã* (Lisbon, Assírio and Alvim, 1997) on the legendary Prester John.

Peter Skalník (PhD, CSc Charles University), Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Lebanon from 1993–6, now teaches Social Anthropology and African Studies at Charles University, Prague, where he is affiliated with the Institute of the Near East and Africa. He has edited *Outwitting the State* (New Brunswick, Transaction Press, 1989), with Henri Claessen *The Early State and the Study of the State* (Mouton, 1978/1981), and with Robert Thornton *The Early Writings of Bronislaw Malinowski* (Cambridge, 1993); and published numerous articles.

Andrew Spiegel (PhD Cape Town), Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, has co-edited *Tradition and Transition in Southern Africa* (Witwatersrand University Press, 1991) and *Violence and Family Life in Contemporary South Africa* (Human Sciences Research Council, 1996), and published papers on migration, poverty, household, housing and tradition in southern Africa.

Peter Wade (PhD Cantab) is currently Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. His books include *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (1993) and *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (1997).

Vanessa Watson (Masters in City and Regional Planning, Cape Town), Associate Professor in City and Regional Planning at the University of Cape Town, has co-authored books on regional planning, urban markets

and local layout planning and published papers on urbanisation and housing policy, household rental and urban restructuring.

Richard Werbner (PhD Manchester) is Professor of African Anthropology and Director of the International Centre for Contemporary Cultural Research at the University of Manchester. Among his many papers and six books, *Tears of the Dead* (Edinburgh University Press, 1991) won the Amaury Talbot Award of The Royal Anthropological Institute.

Peter Wilkinson (Masters in City and Regional Planning, Cape Town), Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture and Planning and Director of the Urban Problems Research Unit, University of Cape Town, has published on urbanisation and migration patterns, housing policy, local government restructuring and South African planning history.

Daniel Yon (PhD York University, Toronto, Canada) is Assistant Professor at York University, holding a joint appointment in Anthropology and the Faculty of Education. His forthcoming book *Elusive Culture* (SUNY Press, 1998) is an ethnography of diaspora, race, identity and schooling.

Machiavellian empowerment and disempowerment

The violent political changes in early
seventeenth-century Ethiopia

Manuel João Ramos

Machiavelli and political theology

In an article recently published in *Social Anthropology*, the journal of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, anthropologist Adam Kuper has proposed a stimulating approach to the study of power relations in what he refers to as pre-colonial political systems in Africa (Kuper 1995). He looks for, and quite convincingly seems to find, traces of a 'distinctly Machiavellian style' both in the strategies and in the principle formulations of two pre-conquest South African leaders in the early nineteenth century: Shaka, chief of the Nguni-Zulu, and Moeshoeshoe, of the Sotho-Tswana. Although, as Kuper reminds his readers from the start, Machiavelli's work and ideas are 'culturally specific', it wouldn't be inappropriate to study 'exotic situations' through a Machiavellian perspective: 'Machiavelli, it seems, may be read with profit as a comparative sociologist, as one might read Weber or Durkheim' (Kuper 1995: 1, 12). More specifically, a 'realistic, cross-cultural political anthropology', interested in understanding strategies for grabbing and keeping power in different cultural contexts would greatly benefit from incorporating Machiavelli's very general law of politics: 'that the prince must use every means to secure his position, for rivals and enemies will be doing their best to undermine him, and moreover each regime has its intrinsic fault lines, which they will exploit' (Kuper 1995: 12). Clearly, then, an evaluation of the potential of conceptual tools like the notions of 'empowerment' and 'disempowerment' in fields covered by the political anthropologist might be enriched by being coupled with such a lucid analysis of the 'power game' as Machiavelli's is. More to the point of the present proceedings, the acts and discourses of self-empowerment, the situations of disempowerment and the ambiguities of empowering strategies, could usefully be read within a Machiavellian framework, and understood as strategies for grabbing and keeping power, and as conditions where it might be gained or lost, globally affecting the overall system.

Kuper's proposal is quite an appealing one, even if he doesn't really care to make it heuristically convincing. The author doesn't advance any arguments

for preferring a Machiavellian point of view to a Voltairean, Hobbesian, Dantean or even a Averroistic, or Aristotelian one, for instance. Furthermore, he doesn't suggest anywhere in the article how the substitution of Weberian or Durkheimian models for a Machiavellian one, or else their mutual complementarity, would lead to a more 'realistic, cross-cultural political anthropology'. Still, the fact that his proposal has, above all, a strong rhetorical foundation shouldn't prevent us from welcoming it. Interestingly, in areas other than strict politics, social psychologists have been for some time dealing with, and categorizing, what they view as specific 'Machiavellian' behavioural and personality types: these refer to the deceptive attitude and decisional behaviour of personalities strongly attracted to leadership, as they are expressed in particularly ambiguous, critical social contexts, where swift and informal individual action is favoured (Christie and Geis 1970). There would also seem to exist a psychological foundation to the characteristic trait of the 'Machiavellian personality' – the ability to suspend any ethical constraints over one's actions and decisions while retaining the capacity of manipulating other people's constraints within a group ('High/Low Machs', see Drory and Gluskinos 1980: 83–5). This use of Machiavelli's ideas, as detailed in *The Prince*, gives us a valuable hint to what can be the proper setting for Kuper's anthropological reading of that Renaissance political analyst: the power game constitutes the interface between collective structures and individual actions, or, as Barth (1959: 2–3) has put it, the systematic individual manipulation of social relations that leads to the (re)creation of institutional groups and to the accretion of individual authority.

Curiously enough, Kuper's contextual option – the study of the 'power game' in two traditional African sovereignty systems – reveals a unexpected degree of kinship between Machiavellian political thought and some pages of Frazer, in the *Golden Bough* and the *Magical Origin of Kings*.¹ In fact, consideration of psychological motivations and of the (frequently deceptive) individual action within the collective system are undoubtedly important forming traits of both the 'prince' and the 'magician-king'.² In the field of studies on traditional ('pre-conquest') African sovereignty systems, recent theoretical production has been largely inspired by an active reappraisal of Frazer's ideas on political theology – to the point that Luc de Heusch (1987a: 269, 271, 1987b: 46–56) defines his views, and those of colleagues such as Alfred Adler and Jean-Claude Muller, as decidedly 'neo-frazeréen'. If for no other reason, Kuper's choice – to analyse, under the rhetorical cloak of a Machiavellian framework, the individual roles and 'styles' of leaders and usurpers within two such traditional systems – deserves more than passing attention: his *Social Anthropology* article, where he explicitly embraces a 'Machiavellian' position, can also be seen as suggesting an alternative to 'neo-frazeréen' models of African sovereignty, like de Heusch's, where attention to the 'power game' have been clearly under-stressed – but an alternative that can still be understood within a Frazerian inquiry into the (both mystical and mystifying) nature of power and

authoritas. In this short chapter, therefore, I propose to test some of the features of a Machiavellian interpretation of a pre-colonial African sovereignty system,³ but in a situation where the attribution of a 'exotic' quality is not as clear-cut as in the ones researched by Kuper. In fact, Christian Ethiopia in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as can be perceived through the writings of a group of missionaries belonging to the Society of Jesus,⁴ is an interesting case where the 'exoticism' of its sovereignty and religious system was, in some measure, brought on as a negative function of a project of (failed) transformation of the Monophysite *Negusa Nagast* (the Ethiopian king of kings) into a Catholic 'prince'.

The story of the confrontation between two Christian models of political and religious sovereignty, and the failed substitution of Monophysitism for Catholicism, was filled with misunderstandings and tragedy. Even if the Jesuitical accounts demand that systematic attention be given to the fact that they voice a explicitly non- (and anti-)Monophysite perspective of the events, met with disturbing silence on the Ethiopian side, there is still a possibility of evaluating the possibilities and limitations of a Machiavellian grammar in relation to empowerment/disempowerment issues in this 'situation'. Three themes in particular can be inspiring:

- 1 the Machiavellian assumption that political action and political strategy (the power game) should be seen as autonomous and in dialectical relation with ethics and ideology;
- 2 the suggestion that individual and informal political action and power relations become most influential in periods of crisis, instability and change, when institutional, traditional means of government seem to crumble;
- 3 the idea that the use of force and violence becomes a legitimate instrument of power when political life stops functioning.

Machiavelli is generally seen as a founder of the Western ideological concept of a secular, lay state. Can he, then, be of use to the political anthropologist, especially when such systems as the ones that go under the general notion of sacral sovereignty are considered? According to a dichotomous view of the political theory, power and legitimacy can be seen as deriving either from social or from supernatural sources. Machiavelli himself is rather obscure about this matter, but this difficulty could be somewhat overcome by accepting de Heusch's (1987: 218, 256–60) (neo-Frazerian) view that political science is a mere part of the history of religions, and that a secular state is only a special case within a more general context. If this is the case, Machiavellian analysis can fruitfully be taken into consideration when we deal with political practice as autonomous from, but interdependent with, political and religious ideology – for, after all, power and legitimacy can be seen as deriving both from social and from supernatural sources.

Up to 1974, according to a peculiar system of priestly sovereignty, evoking both Semitic and African ideological models (Haberland 1965: 71ff), the Ethiopian rulers were supposed to derive their legitimacy and right to rule directly from God through the dynastic line of Solomon: Christlike, they had explicit priestly and jurisdictional functions.⁵ But, from a papal point of view, this was rather an unacceptable heresy: thus, the Portuguese project of converting the *Negusa Nagast* was particularly cherished by Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, whose members saw themselves as the 'soldiers of the Pope'; and great care was put into the appointment of a Jesuit patriarch for Ethiopia.⁶ This project was, in fact, the result of an active joint effort of the Roman papacy and the Portuguese crown (Brodrick 1946: 237–8) – at the height of a counter-Reformation reaction in south-western Europe that favoured the right of spiritual precedence of the Roman Pope over national monarchies and churches.

To understand the contours of the confrontation between two Christian, yet quite distinct, political theologies (Roman Catholic and Monophysite), which gave discursive body to a internecine civil and religious crisis of great dimensions in Ethiopia, it is useful to start by very briefly evoking the European background of expectations and images about this East African nation (James 1990), that, in connection with the legend of Prester John, led to a Portuguese presence in Ethiopia.

From *Presbyter Johannes* to *Negusa Nagast*

Prester John, as the utopian-like description of his Indian kingdom in the early medieval Latin letters clearly show,⁷ was a very potent image of a Christ-mimetic priestly king, intimately connected with the concept, common in western European medieval traditions, of the 'king of the last days' or '*Endkaiser*', who would, in alliance with a western sovereign, emerge from the Orient to conquer Palestine and free Jerusalem from Muslim hands – this pious act would be a prophetic sign of the end of the world and, simultaneously, of its apocalyptic renewal, with the coming of the New Heavenly Jerusalem (Gosman 1983: 270–84). A temporal ruler, he was also a minor priest, a 'presbyter' in a religious hierarchy headed by the patriarch of St Thomas. This Christian utopia was itself inspired in the Syriac Christian traditions that attributed the conversion of an Indian king and his family to the missionary zeal of St Thomas Didymus, who offered the king a palace in Heaven (Slessarev 1959: 80ff; Ramos 1997a: 208ff). In the course of five centuries and up to the seventeenth century, we can witness the transformation and eventual eclipse of the Christ-mimetic character of the Indian priestly king reigning over a perfect society (Ramos 1997a: 1–11, 1997b).

The ideological background of the Iberian discoveries was highly ecumenical. To 'discover' (i.e. to 'uncover') the world was to cast the light of true faith upon the darkness of ignorance and evil that subjected non-Christian humanity

(Barradas de Carvalho 1983: 529ff; Randles 1966: 3ff). In the Portuguese case, travel around African coasts was also conceptualised within a crusading project which meant to a large extent the penetration of the continent through its water courses (Randles 1960: 20–7); these were thought to be connected, in some unknown ways, to the sources of the Nile (through a central African lake), and consequently to Prester John's kingdom – the West African rulers were often treated as his vassals. At the same time, envoys of the Portuguese king were sent by land to East Africa, with letters to 'Preste João das Índias'.

The idea that had come down from the medieval *Letter*, of an alliance between Prester John and a western sovereign (now the Portuguese king), was to be kept alive in the Portuguese–Ethiopian diplomatic epistolary, and in Portuguese strategic military writings: the conquest of the Holy Land, and the destruction of the Muslim world are frequently suggested or proposed in the documentation. But, by the first half of the sixteenth century, the Ethiopian *Negus* was publicly and officially contacted and the discrepancies between the Ethiopian nation and the magnificent kingdom described in the *Letter* were highlighted by Portuguese writers. In fact, reality seemed to have played a terrible trick: how could a black king, living permanently in a tent, ruling over a poor barbarous and schismatic people in a mountainous wilderness, be the magnificent Prester John? Hereticism, poverty, evil ways and uncivilised, improper customs, Jewish and Arabic influences were to be held as definitive proofs of the inadequacy of the identification between the self-styled author of the *Letter* and this African ruler. This inadequacy became manifest when in 1541, in an ironical inversion of expectations, a small Portuguese expeditionary force was sent to rescue young *Negus Galawdevos*' weak armies from defeat at the hands of the Somali invaders (in 1541–3). Just a few years later, the first Jesuit missionaries landed in Ethiopia with the prospect of converting the Monophysite Christians and their emperor, whom the Portuguese, like most Europeans, still insisted on calling Prester John (Ramos 1997a: 171ff).

In respect of the documents that refer to the Portuguese influence, and specially those that detail the Jesuit missionaries' endeavours to convert the Ethiopian Monophysite court to Catholicism, and to obtain the emperor's submission to the Roman Pope, some words of warning should, at this stage, be given. Ethiopian and Arabic documentation almost entirely omits explicit references to the doings of the Jesuits and to the influence of the Catholic community: but in fact, there is reason to believe that the absence of references to the Catholics and the Jesuits in contemporary texts like the royal chronicle of Susinyus express an obvious intention of obscuring part of the memories of this apostate emperor's times (since this chronicle was written or rewritten in his successor's reign).⁸ But one must nevertheless add that the European (i.e. Jesuit) writings of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that report, and most probably overestimate, their own social and political importance within the imperial court and the Christian core of Ethiopia, must be treated with great care.

The Jesuit missionaries claimed they played an extensive role in Susinyus' imperial self-empowering actions (his bid for power). The vision they expressed in innumerable letters and accounts, on which we must rely to try to reconstruct the history and purpose of this relationship, served more than anything to self-legitimise – in the eyes of their European readers (especially the Pope, and the Portuguese crown and Church leaders) – their own presence and identity as a specific group within Ethiopian society, with declared self-empowering interests in the Ethiopian court.⁹ What can, then, be extracted from the documentation?

The Ethiopian political crisis and emperor Susinyus' steps towards legitimacy

Let us rapidly consider the events that surrounded a particularly dramatic moment of the history of the Ethiopian empire. This moment came when Susinyus, the ruling *Negusa Nagast* proclaimed, in an imperial decree in 1624, his conversion and public submission to Pope Urban VIII (Teles 1660, IV: XXVII). Moreover, it ordered that all Christians should convert to Catholicism, and Monophysitism was to be abolished, prohibited and punished with death. Such institutions as polygamy, divorce, annual baptism, circumcision, marriage of the clergy, celebration of the Sabbath were thus made illegal. This unfortunate decision, that eventually caused a general popular rebellion and a bloody civil war (Abir 1980: 211ff), must be viewed, in Machiavellian terms, as a misjudgement and a grave mistake in the political action of an emperor who asserted himself as a tyrant (Machiavelli 1984: IX). Had he succeeded though, this might not only have resulted in the consolidation of his rule, but also in the general recognition of the influence, and indeed power, of a cultural and religious minority: the group of Portuguese migrants and of Catholic converts, and their Jesuit leaders.

Ethiopia, under Christian Amhara rule had been, since the Somali invasion in the middle of the sixteenth century, in a state of social and political turmoil. The traditional system of interdictions that governed the *Neguses'* lives is known to have relaxed. Even if they still ritually ate alone, and refrained from touching the ground directly, they no longer hid behind curtains and veils during ceremonial sessions. The ritual conditioning rules of imperial succession had also evidently been softened: the custom of imprisoning the heirs to the throne in a mountain fortress, *Amba Gueshem*, had been abandoned by the sixteenth century (Pais 1945, I: X). The fragility of traditional political relations in the administrative chain caused by wars and other external circumstances was also visible. In itself that constituted a vicious circle: as it weakened, the central Amhara stronghold came under increasing warring pressure from the Somali Muslims, and immediately after from the Galla (the nomadic Oromo pastoralists). Modifications in the centralised administrative and military structure of the empire were reported: namely, the creation of the king's personal guard and a

drafted army imposed on the feudal class as a parallel and alternative force to the armies raised by each of the lords and chiefs, in order to reduce the dependency of the *Negus* on the feudal class and the landowning monastic orders (Abir 1980: 152–4; Pennec 1996: 143–5, 160ff). Naturally, this favoured a situation of increased antagonism between the emperor and the nobles and the Church. The emperor kept making extensive use of his privilege of appointing and substituting chiefs and governors throughout the empire, and restrained their independent action in the military campaigns. As a result, by the beginning of the seventeenth century the feudal lords were losing many acquired privileges, giving way to the development of a full-fledged autocratic tyranny. The conditions for this development, that Machiavelli analysed in his work *The Prince*, had been fulfilled.

By 1604, when the *Negus* ZaDinguil died, the political and military situation in the Ethiopian Highlands had become very tense; a hard-fought succession struggle followed, between Dingil's weak son Yakob and a young cousin of a previous *Negus*. This pretender, Susinyus, who was later to be enthroned under the name of *Negus* Seltan Segued, as a young man, led a nomadic raiding life and knew Galla/Oromo politics quite well. When he came forward with his claim to replace the appointed emperor Yakob, he had a very good chance of winning the succession conflict. Although his legitimacy was questionable (being only the cousin of a previous *Negus*), he presented better credentials as an opponent of the Galla invaders, as an experienced fighter (familiar with Galla war tactics) and as an alliance maker, than Yakob (Pereira 1892: I–XXX; Abir 1980: 194–6). His steps towards legitimacy took various forms: he apparently succeeded in sustaining Galla invasions and imposing himself as a warlord against other factions, he managed the conversion to Christianity of some Galla and Aggaw groups, and was symbolically enthroned in the old capital of the ancient Aksumite kingdom (Pais 1945, I: XII).

Institutionally legitimated as an (indirect) descendant of King Solomon of Israel, the usurper Susinyus maintained his power by opposing the feudal class, by reducing the influence of the clergy (especially the monastic clergy and the Egyptian Coptic patriarch, the *Abun*), and by trying to succeed both as a warrior and a pacifier. His long reign was a continuous succession of wars and struggles against internal and external enemies. In this context, the empowerment of the small Portuguese/Catholic community, and the group (of not more than twenty at any time) of Jesuit priests, became instrumental for Susinyus. To counterbalance the Ethiopian clergy's power, to obtain Western weapons and military assistance and to introduce foreign technologies seemed to be the pre-conditions to securing a radical political reform in the sovereignty system (see S.B. Chernetsov, in Pennec 1996: 143). He also frequently exploited the tribal factions of the Galla-Oromo, attracting some peripheral groups as allies. In this privileged relation with groups of foreigners, he followed the Machiavellian precept of finding feeble allies to counter

stronger adversaries and not losing control as a legitimate congregator of a multi-fractured society (Machiavelli 1984: III; 1983: II, 4).

But it is important to note that the Portuguese military help the Jesuit priests promised was conditional on the prior conversion of the emperor and his Monophysite subjects to Catholicism, as well as the immediate abandonment of the traditions mentioned earlier. When, in a very dramatic moment, Susinyus accepted imposing the forced conversion on Monophysite Ethiopians, making public his decree, and a Jesuit patriarch was appointed by the Roman Pope to Ethiopia, he made a most grievous mistake, one against which Machiavelli very explicitly warns 'princes': he failed to give priority to his relation with the 'people', the mass of Amhara and Tigrean farmers (Machiavelli 1984: IX). A fact that the Jesuits, shall we say 'Machiavellianly',¹⁰ were careful to omit, was that in any case the Portuguese were by this time unable to bring forward any assistance (the Portuguese were no longer an important power in the Indian Ocean region: Abir 1980: 185–7). One could wonder whether, had Susinyus received the military and technical help he requested, the country would not have plunged into one of the most extensive civil wars recorded in imperial Ethiopia. But, as it was, the forced conversion resulted in a string of rebellions and bloody battles that eventually precipitated the erosion of Amhara rule in Ethiopia. Although it pacified both nobles and clergy, the eventual abolition of the imperial decree and the abdication of the emperor altered this situation only minimally.

Fasilidas, the emperor's chosen son, expelled or sentenced to death the Jesuits, the Portuguese-Ethiopian families and a unknown number of Catholic converts (possibly in the order of the thousands: Coulbeaux 1929: 245–6; Pennec 1996: 170ff; Teles 1660: 352–66). He nevertheless approved the changes introduced by his father, under Jesuit influence, in the political-administrative system: for the first time in the Solomonid dynasty the empire had a fixed capital, and the *Negus*, like a true Renaissance 'prince', was living in a (Western-style) palace. Until then, the emperors were ritual roamers who underlined by their cyclical visits and displacements their bond with the various territories and peoples. They presented, wherever they went, a visual model of imperial power and administration in the form of the institutional disposition of the tents in the camp. As a direct consequence of this immobility, the emperor and the Amhara Christian groups lost control of most of the empire. Ethiopia became for the next two centuries a patch of independent small chiefdoms, subjected to the southern Galla-Oromo invaders (Levine 1974: 78–86; Abir 1980: 231–3).

By Machiavellian standards, the process of fragmentation of the empire had its key turning point in the expressed antagonism between Susinyus and the feudal class, the Church and the Highlands Christian farmers. Moreover, the failure either to expand or even to hold by force the imperial control over the Cushitic and Muslim groups of the lowlands in the south accelerated this fragmentation. Had he succeeded in military terms against these last groups,

Machiavelli would suggest (Machiavelli 1984: XXIV), there would be a chance to maintain imperial power. As it was, the crumbling power of the emperor was turned against a feeble, easily disempowered group that was used as a scapegoat to salvage the unity of the Christian Monophysite section of Ethiopian society.

Worlds apart – the fate of Ethiopian–Jesuit relations

A Machiavellian focal point seems most appropriate to understand the reported events – in the reign of Susinyus – and the doings and motivations of a number of actors. But, again, one should stress that political actions, the dynamics of power, the use of force, etc., are always submitted to the general ideological principles that structure society, even though they leave open various options, various possible modes of political action. Machiavelli was aware of this fact, when he reminded his reader that politicians must take great care to play their game without publicly breaking any ethical rule or forgetting the overall importance of the systems of beliefs and representations (Machiavelli 1984: XVIII; 1983: I.12–13). Let us accept that the general definition of African sacral kingship structures – projects of cosmic tyranny coupled with an extreme fragility of the king's power as expressed by his ritual duties and prohibitions – applied, at least partly, to imperial Ethiopia (Haberland 1965: 71; de Heusch 1983: 23–8). If that was so, it is clear that, momentarily at least, the institution of sacral sovereignty became unbalanced, for there were no means of institutionally controlling the ruler. In a situation where the ritual and institutional constraints that helped limit the emperor's power had been relaxed, and where he emerged as a sort of tyrant, it is interesting to note that more and more insistently he resorted to the use of force, and to an erratic and illusory empowerment of marginal groups, alien to Ethiopian society, as a tool to restrict the opposition of important areas of the Ethiopian *civitas*.

Susinyus was thus favoured with both an accumulation of personal power and freedom of political action, in a situation where the institutional system had been relaxed and the empire threatened by the outside. The forced conversion and the condemnation of traditional customs – which was an evident *fiute en avant*, to use the French expression – can be considered as a manifestation of the tyrant's will to assert his power. These actions can be understood as leading to an abortive creation of a new system of sovereignty, inspired by a Western Latin political and religious model (Abir 1980: 231), which proposed to reinforce the absolute temporal powers of the emperor, even if it strongly limited his ritual Christ-mimetism (i.e. his priestly functions), through his submission to the Roman Pope. The political intentions behind the conversion to Catholicism – as a means to reduce the controlling power of the traditional clergy – seem to have been largely misunderstood by the Portuguese Jesuits, whose missionary zeal consequently led them to disregard and to abruptly try to suppress essential traits of the Monophysite Ethiopians' faith and culture

(Abir 1980: 224–6). This action backfired and eventually resulted in persecutions against the Catholics.

What happened next was most enlightening. Because it was denied the institutional control of the ruler's power, Ethiopian society – 'the people' – adopted the use of violence and rebellion broke out in a conservative reaction to changes imposed from a top that showed insufficient results in defending the country from external threats (by then, the main influx of Galla-Oromo peoples). The obvious misunderstanding and symmetry of intentions and expectations that characterised relations between the Jesuits and Susinyus must also be reviewed. The emperor's political motivations can be interpreted as a personal, desperate attempt to save and renew the empire. That is, to revive the lost glorious days of the dynasty, three centuries before, by empowering a minority seen as culturally and religiously exogenous. As to the Jesuit priests who successively started the process of converting the emperor and his family, and were behind the already mentioned submission decree, their motivations seemed to be an equally desperate attempt to save not the real empire of Ethiopia, but an imaginary one. In due course, the Jesuit fathers found to their own expense that Ethiopian reality resisted fitting this imaginary picture.

In the writings of the Jesuit missionaries, for whom the conversion of the Ethiopian ruler and the search for the sources of the Nile were two interrelated obsessive goals, it is clear that the Ethiopian reality posed a difficult conceptual problem: like other travellers before them, they retained the designation of 'Prester John' as the valid title of the *Negus*; they confronted Ethiopian social and physical reality having the medieval *Letter* in their minds, and were eager to convert Ethiopia so it would conform to the Indian (utopian) model. Partly Christian but heretical, African but in some important ways Asiatic (with Semitic kingship structures, with Semitic language and writing systems), degenerate but visibly 'civilised' since the Aksumite period, Ethiopia was, in the end, to be declared a true monstrosity by the Jesuit writers.

The Jesuits seemed to have modelled their political action upon the account of the conversion of the Indian king by St Thomas, as well as by the papal perspective of spiritual and temporal supremacy over emperors and kings. The ardour that the Jesuit Pero Pais put into planning and building a Western-style church and palace for Susinyus, and his influence in the *Negus'* decision to found a fixed capital, are important hints that the Jesuits were enacting the legendary relation between patriarch of St Thomas and Prester John. As already mentioned, the *Negusa Nagast*, like Prester John in the legend, had priestly functions within the Monophysite Church. So, the Jesuits seemed to conceive that occupying the position of the *Abun*, the Egyptian Coptic patriarch, meant that they could rule over the Ethiopian emperor, because they were representatives of the Catholic Pope. In particular, the Jesuit Afonso Mendes, the appointed Catholic patriarch who arrogantly insisted on the public act of submission of Susinyus to him as the representative of Rome, visibly failed to understand the particular institutional relation between the *Negus* and the

Coptic patriarch he thought he came to replace. This specific act seems to have been the dramatic turning point which marked the reversal of the course of the emperor's political action, and the apparently systematic disempowerment and persecution of the Catholic minority.

In fact, submission of the emperor to the *Abun* (or for that matter to the Jesuit patriarch) was a concept strange to Ethiopian Christian ideology. The *Abun* was a foreigner, a representative of the Alexandrian Coptic Church, that had no hierarchical supremacy over Ethiopian Christianity or over the *Negusa Nagast* who ruled over Christians, Jews, Muslims and pagans alike. Like the *Abun*, the emperor was also considered a foreigner. Their relation was that of two structurally opposed representatives of foreign civilisations: the *Negus*, who held the title of 'lion of Judah', was the 'son of the kings of Israel' (Haberland 1965: 25–33); and the *Abun* was the representative of the eunuch, the slave of the legendary queen Candace, who introduced Christianity to Ethiopia (Teles 1660: XXVIII). So, in the Ethiopian perspective, there was little reason to see the emperor, descendant of Menelik, the older of Solomon's sons, submit to a representative of the westerners, the *ferenjoch*, descendants of Adrâmi, the young Byzantine half-brother of the first sacred king Menelik, referred to in the *Kebra Nagast* (Budge 1932: 122). As to the attacks on circumcision, polygamy, yearly ritual baptism, etc., and the supreme Jesuitical heresy of affirming that Christ had two natures, these were felt by most as absurdities and pure devilish malignity (Pereira 1892: 259).

Fasilidas, Susinyus' son, aimed at easing the enormous tensions between Amharic and Tigrean groups (both Monophysite Christians), and to achieve this he opted to sacrifice the Catholic minority. He managed to repair the damage caused by his father's 'mistake' (as Machiavelli would put it), but this act of disempowerment was of limited efficacy, for it could not prevent the actual ebb of imperial, and generally Christian, rule over Ethiopian affairs – now dominated by Galla-Oromo influences.¹¹ Symmetrically, in the perspective of the disempowered Jesuits, Prester John was finally dead (Lobo 1971: 786–9). The tentative identification between Prester John and the Ethiopian ruler came to be actively denied in their writings: not, as before the persecution, as an ambiguous precondition for their pretensions to self-legitimation in European courtly and ecclesiastical circles (especially in their confrontation with the Dominican order, in Italy and the Iberian peninsula), but in definitely negative terms, as the discursive reflection of the violent disempowerment they suffered, from 1631 until their final expulsion.

Final note

A purely dichotomous perspective that promotes the interpretation of a situation or discourse in terms of asymmetry and conflict between dominating and dominated groups, may fruitfully give way to an awareness of the logical dependence between opposition and communion as defining any kind of social and

cultural interaction. In the particular case presented here, we are primarily dealing with a quantity of literary documents produced by the Jesuit missionaries, with mainly self-legitimising intentions. In order to categorise the conflicting and uncontrolled Ethiopian reality, they systematically characterised it as in a state of progressive demonic 'otherness'. But this quality of 'otherness' was both a function of an historical attribution of 'sameness' (the identity between the realm of Prester John and Christian Ethiopia) and a embittered recognition that, in their disempowerment, the Jesuits were themselves being demonised and categorised as alien in Ethiopian eyes. This 'exotic situation' gives us a compelling example of the consubstantial quality of a relation where 'sameness' and 'otherness' are overlapping categories.

So, to understand, in a 'Machiavellian-Frazerian' perspective, Emperor Susinyus' actions during the above-mentioned civil and religious crisis, it seems important to reassess his relation with the Jesuit missionaries – his 'feeble allies', as Machiavelli would put it. Luc de Heusch's view of the relation between the African sovereign and an essentially lineage-structured society is here of little use: Ethiopian historical reality does not conform to the simplifying idea that a structurally egalitarian society, teleologically guessing the dangers of sacralising central power – the simultaneously sacred and evil character of the sovereign – creates a overwhelming system of ritual and ideological constraints to limit his power (de Heusch 1987a: 271, 291). Luc de Heusch's interpretation of the mystical power of the sovereign – the source of his/her sacrality – does not, unfortunately, incorporate an element that nevertheless seemed obvious to both Machiavelli and Frazer: the quality of mystification as a source of the power game. As to Adam Kuper, his unawareness of the importance of the ritual and ideological constraints through which the leader's actions must be perceived, seems a unnecessary weakening of his Machiavellian perspective, and one that Machiavelli himself wouldn't probably have approved of.

Ethiopian history and literature, from Menelik I in the *Kebra Nagast*, and the traditions about Queen Candace, to the imperial chronicles of Galawdevos and Susinyus, to Menelik II's and Haile Selassie's biographies (or even the 'red' Mengistu Haile Mariam's presidency), offer us recurrent examples of how imperial power in Ethiopia conceived political and cultural reforms, and solutions for both exogenous and endogenous crisis, through a carefully planned association with foreigners, namely Europeans (the *ferenjochi*). This feature should alert us to the possibility of conceptualising the mythical and historical usurpers' self-legitimising actions and their preferred alliances with groups evidently marginal to Ethiopian society, during periods of social crisis, in more general terms: political action is certainly autonomous from but also interdependent with ideological, ethical and theological constraints; these two contextual levels interact within a cyclical structure where normally polarised elements – in this case, the *Negusa Nagast* as a figure of perfect social identity or 'sameness', and the European Jesuits as figures of malignant alterity or 'otherness' – are momentarily associated as a precondition to envision a (cyclical)

renewal of society and of the imperial institution, which warrants their perpetual interdependence.

This feature, which Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 18, 20) has in another context described as an 'association of contraries' or an 'union of opposites', seems not only widespread in African sovereignty systems but determinant in their formation and continuity (for a comparative review, cf. Gomes da Silva 1989). Behind the confrontational rhetoric that percolates from the discourses of social-political domination and disempowerment, we recognise an equally relevant play of the elements that speak of recognition, identity, 'sameness'. In the case of the 'realm(s) of Prester John' as in many others, it is only when we take notice of the whole ontological and relational process that we understand the effectiveness and strength of the pulleys that hold opposing categories together.

Notes

- 1 One could, naturally, direct at Kuper's proposal the same sort of reproach that Adler (1982: 265) directs at Evans-Pritchard: that he empties the ritual content of the institution of sacral sovereignty, reducing it to a system of competition for power.
- 2 Compare Machiavelli's praise of the deceiving qualities of the 'good prince' and the simplicity of the people (Machiavelli 1984: XVIII), with Frazer's view of the magician's and king's use of imposture (namely their voluntary misuse of the laws of causation) to acquire and accumulate personal power, that reverts to the general good of society – the 'credulous fellows' (Frazer 1920: 82–3; 1978: 80–1, 109).
- 3 In truth, a historical conjuncture in an African non-colonised nation.
- 4 Itself an ecclesiastical 'corporate group' recurrently perceived or identified as politically Machiavellian, in the same cultural context as the one that produced *The Prince*: one should note that the Spanish-Italian Jesuit elite was born in such houses as the Medicis, Borgias and Gandias, abundantly depicted in Machiavelli's work; Saint Francis Borgia, kin and descendant of Machiavelli's 'prince' Cesare Borgia, was in fact the third General of the Society of Jesus.
- 5 According to the 1947 Constitution of the Ethiopian state, 'the Emperor's person is sacred, his dignity is inviolable and his authority indisputable'; traditionally, the emperor is said to 'shine like the sun; his majesty fills men with awe and they recognize that the divine power is in him' (Bureau 1992: 24).
- 6 To the point that the original draft of the Society's *Constitutions*, which forbade its members to accept any ecclesiastical dignities higher than that of simple priesthood, was modified in order to accommodate the designation of a Jesuit patriarch for Ethiopia (Brodrick 1946: 237).
- 7 See the compilation of the *Epistola Johannes Presbyter*, with inclusion of the Latin versions of interpolations in Zarucke (1879: 909–24).
- 8 See text and translation in Pereira (1892–1900). On the comparison between the Ethiopian version (brought to Europe by James Bruce), and the abridged version by Pero Pais in his *História*, see Pennec 1996: 153–60.
- 9 It is never possible to assert that, when a specific group is said, in a particular set of documents, to exert a dominant role, or when it puts forward an 'empowered' discourse, that this necessarily reflects a dominant status at the level of social structure. The making of a self-empowering discourse can frequently be a tacit recognition of a disempowered condition.

- 10 As a personality disposition, Machiavellianism is intimately connected with a high capability of ingratiation in interpersonal relations (cf. Pandey and Rastogi 1979).
- 11 These populations, ignorant of centralised political models, seemed to have preferred maintaining the imperial administrative structures in place, and simply encroached themselves on the emperor's court, as controlling agents (Abir 1980: 234–5; Levine 1974: 80, 82).

References

- Abir, M. (1980) *Ethiopia and the Red Sea – The Rise of the Solomonid Dynasty and Muslim-European Rivalry in the Region*. London: Frank Cass.
- Adler, A. (1982) *La Mort est le masque du roi: la royauté sacrée des Moundang du Tchad*. Paris: Payot.
- Barradas de Carvalho, J. (1983) *A la recherche de la spécificité de la renaissance portugaise*, vol. II. Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian.
- Barth, F. (1959) *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans*. London: Athlone Press.
- Brodrick, J., SJ (1946) *The Progress of the Jesuits (1556–79)*. London: Longman Green.
- Budge, E.A.W. (1932) *The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bureau, J. (1992) Éthiopie: images et reflets. In *Le Roi Salomon et les maîtres du regard: art et médecine en Éthiopie*. Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux (pp. 23–4).
- Christie, R. and Geis, F.L. (1970) *Studies in Machiavellianism*. New York: Academic Press.
- Coulbeaux, J.-B. (1929) *Histoire politique et religieuse de l'Abyssinie*. Paris: Paul Geuthner.
- de Heusch, L. (1982) *Rois nés d'un cœur de vache: mythes et rites bantous*. Paris: Gallimard.
- (1987a) *Écrits sur la royauté sacrée*. Bruxelles: Editions de l'ULB.
- (1987b) L'Inversion de la dette (propos sur les royautés sacrées africaines). In *L'Esprit des lois sauvages: Pierre Clastres ou une nouvelle anthropologie politique* (ed.) Miguel Abensour. Paris: Éditions du Seuil (pp. 41–57).
- Drory, A. and Gluskinos, U.M. (1980) Machiavellianism and leadership. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 65, 1: 81–6.
- Frazer, J.G. (1920) *The Magical Origin of Kings*. Cambridge: Trinity College.
- (1978/1922) *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* (abr. edn). London: Macmillan.
- Gomes da Silva, J.C. (1989) *L'Identité volée: essais d'anthropologie sociale*. Bruxelles: Editions de l'ULB.
- Gosman, M. (1983) Otto de Freising et le Prêtre Jean. *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 61: 271–85.
- Haberland, E. (1965) *Untersuchungen zum Äthiopischen Königtum*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- James, W. (1990) Kings, commoners, and the ethnographic imagination in Sudan and Ethiopia. In *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing* (ed.) R. Fardon. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press (pp. 96–135).
- Kuper, A. (1995) Machiavelli in pre-colonial Southern Africa. *Social Anthropology* 3, 1: 1–13.
- Levine, D. (1974) *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

- Lobo, J. (1971) *Itinerário e outros escritos inéditos* (ed.) M. Gonçalves da Costa. Porto: Livraria Civilização.
- Machiavelli, N. (1983/1531) *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, 2 vols. (trans.) L. Walker. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- (1984/1532) *The Prince* (trans.) P. Bondanella and M. Musa. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pais, P. (1945) *História da Etiópia*, vols 1 and 2. Porto: Livraria Civilização.
- Pandey, J. and Rastogi, R. (1979) Machiavellianism and ingratiation. *Journal of Social Psychology* 108: 221–5.
- Pennec, H. (1996) La mission jésuite en Éthiopie au temps de Pedro Paez (1583–1622) et ses rapports avec le pouvoir Éthiopien. Troisième partie: le temps de la victoire (1612–22). *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, vol. xxxviii, 1996 (1994). Roma-Napoli (pp. 139–81).
- Pereira, F.E. (1892–1900) *Chronica de Susenyus, rei de Ethiopia*, vol. 2. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. (1952) The comparative method in social anthropology. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 81, 1–2: 15–20.
- Ramos, M.J. (1997a) *Ensaio de Mitologia Cristã: A Preste João e a Reversibilidade Simbólica*. Lisboa, Editora Assírio and Alvim.
- (1997b) Origen y evolution de una imagen Cristo-mimética: El Preste Juan en el tiempo y el espacio de las ideas cosmológicas europeas. *Política y Sociedad. Revista cuatrimestral de Ciencias Sociales* (Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociología – Universidad Complutense de Madrid) May–Aug. Agosto 25: 37–44.
- Randles, W.G. (1960) Notes on the genesis of the discoveries. *Studia* 5: 20–46.
- (1966) Sur l'idée de découverte. In *Aspects internationaux de la découverte océanique aux XV^e. et XVI^e. siècles: travaux du cinquième colloque international d'histoire maritime, Lisbonne 14–16 Sept.* (eds) M. Mollat and P. Adam Paris: SEVPEN (pp. 17–21).
- Slessarev, V. (1959) *Prester John. The Letter and the Legend*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Teles, B. (1660) *História geral da Etiópia a Alta ou Preste João*. Coimbra: Manoel Dias – Impressor da Universidade.
- Zarncke, F. (1879) Der Presbyter Johannes. *Abhandlungen der Philologisch-Historischen Classe der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* (Leipzig) 7: 827–1039.