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.

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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.