The Remains of Power: Meaning and Function of *Regalia* in Madagascar

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Abstract
It has become commonplace to represent sovereignty as an almost divine and transcendent power, a concept that has its roots in the ancient Roman world. In the first of four volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, for example, Michel Foucault (1978: 135) argues that the power of the modern sovereign derives "no doubt from the ancient *patria potestas* that granted the father of the Roman family the right to 'dispose' of the life of his children and his slaves." Following this analytical path, Giorgio Agamben (2015) goes so far as to state that the political capture of life represents the original paradigm of the entire history of Western civilization. This ontological and Western-centric reading of sovereignty has had an enormous influence on the social and human sciences. Taking its cue from Ernst Kantorowicz's insights into the 'duality' of power, this article problematizes Agamben's reading by exploring an alternative paradigm, which conceives sovereignty as a chronotopic apparatus and ordering ritual. Through an analysis of the meaning and function of royal remains (*regalia*), effigies and ritual practices in western Madagascar, the essay shows a different understanding of sovereignty and of its symbolism, which can be used to develop an alternative genealogy of political power.

Keywords: sovereignty; regalia; representation; duality; Madagascar; chronotope

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> "Substitution … the infinite cannot be made into matter, but it is possible to create an illusion of the infinite: the image."
>
> Andrey Tarkovsky[1]

In 1923, at the end of one of his sojourns in the Bellevue sanatorium at Kreuzlingen, Aby Warburg gave a lecture entitled *Schlangenritual* (Snake Ritual), which would later appear in the *Journal of the Warburg Institute*.[2] The text is the result of a journey among the Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest undertaken by the author nearly thirty years before, and of a long and tortured meditation on the relationship between the power of images and social reality.[3] Traversing centuries of artistic practice and thought, from ancient paganism to modern secularism, Warburg's essay shows how the snake is "a universal (*internationales*) symbol intended as an answer to the question: where do the fury of the elements, death and pain come from?"[4] In this sense, the snake-image would be the actualized form of the human tragedy of living and dying, a visual *topos*, or in Warburg's expression, *Pathosformel*, which concretizes the latent flow of collective emotions.[5]

This article takes up Warburg's methodological path but directs it toward a markedly more political direction. Paraphrasing his guiding question in the above-

[1] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 38.

[2] Warburg, "A Lecture on Serpent Ritual". A revised version has been published as *Schlangenritual: Ein Reisebericht*.

[3] See Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 216–227.

[4] Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, 70.

[5] See Weigel, "Aby Warburg's *Schlangenritual*: Reading Culture and Reading Written Texts". On Warburg's notion of *Pathosformel*, see, among others, Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 17–59.

mentioned essay, in what follows I seek to explore to what extent a pagan conception of kingship, such as can be found in the western part of Madagascar, may be useful for understanding the evolution of sovereign power and its representative forms. This line of inquiry, I believe, is particularly pertinent given the current state of scholarship on the subject. In fact, it has become a commonplace nowadays to represent sovereignty as an almost divine and transcendent power, which has its roots in the ancient Roman world. In the first of four volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, for example, Michel Foucault argues that the power of the modern sovereign derives "*no doubt* from the ancient *patria potestas* that granted the father of the Roman family the right to 'dispose' of the life of his children and his slaves." [6] Following this analytical trajectory, Giorgio Agamben goes so far as to state that the political capture of life represents the original paradigm of the entire history of Western civilization.[7] For the Italian philosopher, the sovereign's inviolability would be the specular and symmetrical figure of human *sacertas*, of "bare life" captured in the polis. As he put it: "supreme power … is always *vitae necisque potestas* and always founded on a life that may be killed but not sacrificed."[8]

[6] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 135; emphasis added.

[7] "In the course of the study, the structure of the exception that had been defined with respect to bare life has been revealed more generally to constitute in every sphere the structure of the *archē*, in the juridico-political tradition as much as in ontology. In fact, one cannot understand the dialectic of the foundation that defines Western ontology, from Aristotle onward, if one does not understand that it functions as an exception ... *The strategy is always the same: something is divided, excluded, and pushed to the bottom, and precisely through this exclusion, it is included as archē and foundation*" (Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 264; emphasis added).

[8] Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 100.

Disregarding the cautionary remarks of Foucault, Agamben has thus transformed a *formal* analogy into a *trans-epochal* paradigm.[9] This ontological and Western-centric reading of sovereignty has had enormous influence in the social and human sciences.[10] Taking its cue from Ernst Kantorowicz's insights into the "duality" of power, this article problematizes Agamben's reading by exploring an alternative paradigm, the one which conceives sovereignty as a chronotopic apparatus and ordering ritual. Through an analysis of the meaning and function of sovereign remains (*regalia*), effigies and ritual practices in western Madagascar, the essay shows a different understanding of sovereignty[11] and of its symbolism, which can be used to elaborate an alternative genealogy of political power.

The article is divided into three parts. The next section explores the origin and function of royal relics in the kingdoms of western Madagascar.[12] It mostly relies on sociological and anthropological research but also discusses some primary sources, such as the travelogues of the first Europeans who visited "la Grande île," many of which have not been translated into English. The second section offers a detailed analysis of the most important ritual concerning royal relics: the bath of *regalia* or *fitampoha*. This analysis clarifies the main purpose of

[9] For Foucault, the analogy between the power of the modern sovereign and that of the Roman *pater familias* is only formal (cf. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 135).

[10] For a critical overview, see Jennings, "Sovereignty and Political Modernity: A Genealogy of Agamben's Critique of Sovereignty". For a critique of Agamben's reading of Foucault's notions of "sovereignty" and "biopolitics", see Blencowe, "Foucault's and Arendt's 'Insider View' of Biopolitics: A Critique of Agamben".

[11] Here I use the notion of "sovereignty" in ahistorical terms, but it would be better to distinguish between kingship and sovereignty (something which Agamben never explicitly does). It should be out of question that the notion of sovereignty is an exclusively modern and European product; see, e.g., De Jouvenel, *Sovereignty*, 169–175. However, as I will try to show, the *function* performed by sovereignty is to some extent connected with that performed by kingship. For a genealogical reconstruction of the sovereignty-kingship nexus, see Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*, 377-464.

[12] This article focuses exclusively on the Sakalava kingdoms of Menabe (south west) and Boina (north west).

the article, that is, the articulation of a theory of sovereignty understood as a chronotopic apparatus. In the final section, through a discussion of different interpretations of royal rituals and relics, I will try to explain the relevance of this research hypothesis for current studies on sovereign power and its representative forms.

The Origin and Function of Royal Relics in Western Madagascar[13]

Doubles and representations of power have been at the center of the theological-political debate since the publication of Ernst Kantorowicz's magnum opus *The King's Two Bodies*. In this work, the German historian relates the funeral effigies of sovereigns to the juridical doctrine of the double body of the king. To recall Kantorowicz's well-known thesis, the corpse of the king represented his natural body, or the perishable and transitory aspect of power, while the funeral effigies symbolized the political body, or the immortal and eternal aspect of sovereignty. As he argues: "enclosed in the coffin ... there rested the corpse of the king, his mortal and normally visible – though now invisible – body natural; whereas his normally invisible body politic was on this occasion visibly displayed by the effigy in its pompous regalia: a *persona ficta* – the effigy – impersonating a *persona ficta – the Dignitas*."[14]

[13] The Sakalava royal relics are called *jiny* in the southwestern part of Madagascar, *dady* in the Menabe region and *jiny* or *mitahy* in the Majunga and northwestern regions. See Ballarin, *Les reliques royales à Madagascar*, 33, n.2. Here I use the expressions "regalia" or "royal relics" to designate all the synonyms mentioned above.

[14] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 421.

As Kantorowicz repeatedly stresses, the doctrine of the king's two bodies and its visual transposition in the effigies hide a problem of *continuity*.[15] Thanks to its transcendental double, sovereign power can be conceived of as a sort of phoenix that constantly arises from its own ashes, in a dynamic of perpetual renewal that guarantees the immortality of power: "The funerary procession itself demonstrated very clearly the concurrence of two heterogeneous ideas: the triumph of Death and the triumph over Death."[16] In short, the doubling of power in its image is instrumental to the preservation of the kingdom. Through the use of representations, what is not alive – the effigy – becomes the custodian of the continuity of political order: thanks to the king's double, the *kingdom* never dies.

This relationship between the doubling of power and the continuity of the kingdom is, as we shall see, fundamental to understanding the function of royal relics in western Madagascar. With a proviso, though: the Malagasy ontology of representation is radically different from that of the Western Middle Ages. In fact, royal relics do not simply represent kingship qua *regalia* (that is, as symbols and attributes of royalty), but create and embody it (as *sacralia* and remains of deceased sovereigns). In other words, the king is, by means of his own body, the specific place of the dynamics of doubling and representation.[17]

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[15] Ibid., 273: "Undoubtedly the concept of the 'king's two bodies' camouflaged a problem of continuity." This crucial point is discussed in greater detail below.

[16] Ibid., 429.

[17] Balandier, *Le pouvoir sur scènes*, 32. The difference between *regalia* and *sacralia* is discussed by Le Goff, among others, in "Reims, City of Coronation". It is interesting to note that in the ceremony of anointing and coronation of the French monarchs in the Reims cathedral the king had to be literally "made" by means of consecration and vestiture, that is, he had to receive both *sacralia* and *regalia*. Undoubtedly, this double structure of power reflects the historical specificity of the French Middle Ages where sovereignty sought to create "a liturgical and symbolic staging of the balance of power, old and new, church and state"; Ibid., 215. The clear separation – and the consequent reunification – of the two powers, sacred and political, is obviously not present in Madagascar.

It has been noted that the function and the liturgical power of the Malagasy royal remains are comparable to the Christian relics of martyrs and the cult that was formed around them, which, as is well known, gave rise to a vast historical and anthropological literature.[18] Van Gennep, for example, argues that royal "relics are absolutely assimilable to our relics of the saints, receptacle of the virtue of the dead; all the power, all the holiness of the royal family, the personification of the whole of society, is concentrated in *regalia* [...]; it is not only political power but the very life of the society which is deposited there."[19] Yet, it is precisely this bond between political power and social order, which van Gennep attributes to royal relics, that needs to be clarified and that makes the function of *regalia* in Madagascar peculiar with respect to the cult of Western saints.

It is difficult to ascertain the origins of the cult of royal relics and whether it was superimposed to an older cult of ancestors, which is diffused across Madagascar.[20] In effect, the use of relics is attested to by the first historical records. Father Luis Mariano, a Jesuit who traveled to the western region of the island in 1616, noted that "the eldest sons keep as relics the facial hairs, the nails and the loincloth of their fathers, most of the time having the objects sewn in a strip of fabric which they tie around their loins. The aristocrats place these objects in a sort of ugly little reliquary which they attach to a belt they wear when they go

[18] See the classic work by Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*. See, also, Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 239–332.

[19] Van Gennep, *Tabou et totémisme à Madagascar*, 116. A similar interpretation is offered by Ballarin, "Culte des ancêtres royaux et légitimation du pouvoir dans la région de Majunga (nord-ouest de Madagascar), 1822-2004."

[20] On the cult of ancestor in Madagascar, see Jaovelo-Dzao, *Mythes, rites et trances à Madagascar*, 213-4, and the contributions collected by Karen Middleton in *Ancestors, Power, and History in Madagascar*.

to festivals or to war."[21] The only certainty is that royal relics are at least coeval with the emergence of the Sakalava kingdoms in the late 16th century. Marie-Pierre Ballarin, who studied royal relics in detail, argues that they were introduced in order to legitimize the new-born kingdoms.[22] In this sense, *regalia* represent the source of power and their possession would guarantee its legitimacy.[23] A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point: 1. As we will see in greater detail later on, royal relics are used at the moment of succession, when power passes from one king to another; 2. At the end of the 17th century, when Tsimenate (Andriamandisoarivo) established the Boina kingdom after a succession struggle with his brothers, one of the first things he did was to take some reliquaries with him to legitimize the new-born kingdom;[24] 3. When the Merina army in 1824 and then the French in 1897 conquered the western part of Madagascar, they kept the traditions and rituals linked to royal relics and actually integrated them into their own apparatus of power.[25]

It would be better, however, to distinguish between the investiture rituals and the legitimation mechanisms, although both rest on the use of sacred relics.

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[21] Cited in Ballarin, *Les reliques royales à Madagascar*, 48. I base my historical reconstruction mainly on this excellent work.

[22] Ibid., 50–56.

[23] Already in 1872, the French naturalist and explorer Alfred Grandidier wrote: "the possession of these relics constitutes the right to kingship. A legitimate heir who is dispossessed of them would lose all authority over his people, and the usurper on the contrary would ascend the throne without dispute." Grandidier, "Madagascar", 402.

[24] Lombard, *Le royaume Sakalava du Menabe*, 40–41; Ballarin, *Les reliques royales à Madagascar*, 41.

[25] The struggles for the symbolic and political control of *regalia* show how, in the words of a French officer, "the moral effect produced" by the possession of royal relics "is undeniable" and can be used to increase "our prestige over the natives." See Ballarin, "Culte des ancêtres royaux et légitimation du pouvoir dans la région de Majunga", 194. This dialectic of symbolic and political occupations and reoccupations of *regalia* demonstrates the existence of alternative colonization strategies to the notorious *divide et impera*. Royal relics have also been the subject of a legal dispute which began at the end of the 1950s and has continued to the present day. See Ballarin, "Les reliques des rois de l'Ouest malgache. Histoire d'un procès (1957-1997)".

In effect, *regalia* play a fundamental role both in the enthronement ceremony of the new king and during the interregnum that begins upon the death of the sovereign. In this delicate period for the life of the kingdom,[26] royal relics are temporarily moved from their usual place (*doany*) and preserved in the house of one of the king's sons or of a member of the ancient lineage of *tompon-tany*.[27] Upon the death of the sovereign the entire kingdom enters a period of mourning, and soon thereafter the preparations for the performance of the various funeral rites begin.[28] The most significant ritual, as far as our topic is concerned, is that of ancestralization: the king's body is washed and sprinkled with honey; some of its parts (e.g., nails and hair) are removed and then kept in reliquaries. Before burying the body, the officiants call on the protection of the ancestors in their funeral orations: "we invoke you, ancestors. We implore your kindness and protection. Let us finish our *fanompoabe* (great ceremony) without difficulty. [...] Do not make us suffer, bless us. Koezy, ô Zañahary! [we salute you, Zañahary!]."[29] The reference to Zañahary, the creator God, is not accidental.[30] It implies that the deceased king has now joined the immortal and transcendent powers: "You are

[26] Among the Sakalavas, when the king dies it is said that "the earth is broken" (*folaka fañy*) or that it is "inclined" (*nihilaña*). See Jaovelo-Dzao, *Mythes, rites et trances à Madagascar*, 174.

[27] Ballarin, *Les reliques royales à Madagascar*, 77. *Tompon-tany* literally means "masters of the soil" and refers to the ancient inhabitants of the western and central regions of Madagascar. See Lombard, *Le royaume Sakalava du Menabe*, 16–17. It is interesting to note that, just like the *patres* in ancient Rome (see below), the heirs of these ancient communities are entrusted with the regency of the symbols of power during the interregnum. In both cases, autochthonous groups represent the original link with the foundation of the kingdom and the ancestors: "the *tompon-tany* communities had the privilege of dialogue with the ancestors who are at the origin of the land they occupied." Ibid., 96.

[28] For a detailed discussion, see Jaovelo-Dzao, *Mythes, rites et trances à Madagascar*, 174–9.

[29] Ibid., 176.

[30] On the cult and phenomenology of Zañahary, see ibid., 60–5 and 215–30.

dead, and you are still the king, but you no longer reign over us: you reign over other countries and other peoples."[31]

After the funeral rituals are completed, the new sovereign is finally brought into the presence of the *regalia*. Before taking possession of them, he takes a solemn oath, invoking, in genealogical order, the sovereign's predecessors to invest him with their spiritual power (*hasina*). In this manner, royal relics intervene in the investiture of the new king. More than that, as Ballarin argued, they literally *make* the new king.[32]

Here we encounter a structure of power, and of its continuity, which is similar to the one described by Kantorowicz: royal relics represent the eternal and immortal body of power; they ensure the continuity of the kingdom upon the death of the sovereign by filling the void opened by the physical departure of the king.[33] In effect, the rituals described above rest on a metaphysical dualism that allows the regeneration of power: the deceased king "returns" to the origin through the process of ancestralization, while the new ruler is invested with the power of origin (i.e., of the ancestor kings) that resides in the royal relics. This double body of power – transcendent and immanent, dead yet resuscitable, visible but impersonal, original and actualizable – is what guarantees the existence and health of the kingdom.

What is interesting to note here is that the function of continuity performed by doubles of power – i.e., royal relics and representations – can also be found in

[31] Ibid., 176.

[32] Ballarin, *Les reliques royales à Madagascar*, 80.

[33] Obviously, the similarity refers to the function and does not pertain to the symbolic structure which, as already noted, is different. It goes without saying that even the notion of "continuity" can take on different meanings on the basis of the historical experiences on which it is based.

other African kingdoms. We know, for example, that the jawbone of a *kabaka* (king) of Buganda (Uganda) was enshrined after his death, and that in Yorubaland, Nigeria, the *oba* (traditional ruler) of Oyo consumed the powdered heart of his predecessor.[34] Perhaps the most exemplary case is that of the Shilluk of South Sudan. In this kingdom, too, at the death of the king, power is returned, as it were, to his double, thus filling the void and giving continuity to the kingdom. As Evans-Pritchard argued, "it appears that during the interregnum the effigy is believed to contain the spirit of Nyikang, to be Nyikang in fact."[35]

This genealogical structure of power, described by myths and embodied in rituals, can be encountered even in the Western world. In the ancient Roman kingdom, for example, when the consulate became vacant for voluntary or involuntary causes (abdication or death of the consuls), *imperium* returned to the *patres*, i.e., to that small group of senators who were the custodians of sacral wisdom (*auctoritas*), and who had the duty to preserve the political order during the interregnum. And that the *repetitio auspiciorum* (repetition of the auspices) was the cornerstone of the Roman political and legal system is due precisely to the fact that the *patres* were invested with the transcendent power (*imperium*)[36] that bound them both symbolically and directly to the founding act of the city:

[34] MacGaffey, "Kingship in Sub-Saharan Africa", 323.

[35] Evans-Pritchard, "The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan", 416. Nyikang is the semi-legendary founder of the Shilluk kingdom. For a more recent account of the divine kingship of the Shilluk, see Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*, 65-138. On the differences between the use of effigies in the Shilluk royal rituals of death and installation and the use of effigies in late medieval/early modern royal ceremonies, see Schnepel, "Shilluk Royal Ceremonies of Death and Installation."

[36] The notion of "imperium", like all notions, has undergone changes in meaning over the course of its long, millenary, semantic life. I base my interpretation on the compelling work by Magdelain, *Recherches sur l'"Imperium". La loi curiate et les auspices d'investiture*.

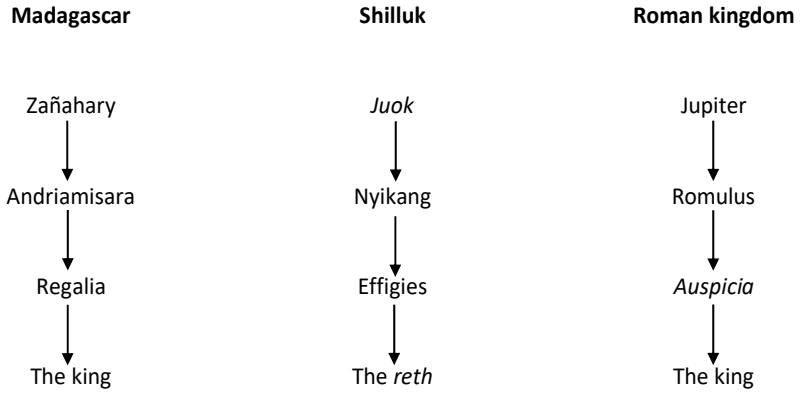
Jupiter's blessing.[37] Re-election was, therefore, an act of re-foundation that lent continuity to the political order: Jupiter's power was eternal and transcendent, yet continually "reincarnated" in its historical and sapiential forms. By means of this articulation, the problem of the foundation, actualization and, above all, continuity of power found its proper rhythm.

What one should take from this brief comparative reconstruction is the specular relationship between the structure of power and that of archaic temporality: we have seen that among the Sakalavas of Madagascar – as well as among the Shilluk of Sudan and in the ancient Roman kingdom – the rituals connected to royalty are based on a genealogy of power according to which sacredness passed from God to the first mythical founder, and from him to the historical king, who is able to receive and embody original sacredness by entering into contact with its representations (see Figure 1). In this way, the power of origin justifies the origin of power.[38]

Figure 1. Genealogies of Power: A Comparative Illustration

[37] See Magdelain, "Auspicia ad patres redeunt." See also, Cerella, *Genealogies of Political Modernity*, 33–43.

[38] As Lombard noted with regard to Madagascar, the various Sakalava dynasties legitimize their power by referring "to the history of the Creation of the World." Discourse and power, myth and ritual, are inextricably linked and contribute to creating the myth of origin: "Everything that precedes the history of the kingdom is the story of the founding dynasty of the kingdom." Lombard, *Le royaume Sakalava du Menabe*, 98.



The genealogical structure of power is very similar in these kingdoms, and what seems to vary the most is precisely the *form* of the royal representation. In Madagascar, relics mediate between transcendence (Zañahary),[39] mythical origin (Andriamisara)[40] and the historical king; among the Shilluk the effigies of Nyikang perform this function. In ancient Rome, a small group of senators, the *patres*, represent the element of continuity with the founder (Romulus) and his pact with Jupiter. Probably, we are here in the presence of a dynamic of abstraction, which is obviously not linear: in the Malagasy rituals, physical parts of the king's body symbolize the whole of royalty; among the Shilluk, the tree effigy of Nyikang represents sovereign power; while in Rome the sacred auspices (*auspicia maxima*) are thought of as something that can be detached from the body of the sovereign and returned to their original genealogical locus: the founding fathers of the city.

Royal doubles and effigies are, therefore, at the heart of important political functions: they are sources for legitimation of power and instruments for the

[39] Ibid., 96: "The founding ancestor of the dynasty derives his power from God, nothing belongs to him, but he owns everything."

[40] It is telling that all traditions agree in attributing the origin of royal relics to the mythical founder Andriamisara. See Ballarin, *Les reliques royales à Madagascar*, 50. On the Malagasy cult of Andriamisara, see Rakoto, "Le culte d'Andriamisara", and Ramamonjisoa, "Questions sur Andriamisara."

continuity of the kingdom. But they are also, and above all, used in rituals aimed at the regeneration of the socio-political order, the most important of which in western Madagascar is the *fitampoha*, or royal bath, which is the focus of the next section.

The Bath of *Regalia*

The bath of royal relics is an annual[41] collective celebration that marks allegiance to the ancestral kings, and reactivates and channels their sacred power into the kingdom.[42] It is a compelling and sophisticated ritual in which the whole society participates, although in forms and roles prescribed by the social and symbolic hierarchies. The ceremony takes place during the harvest season on a small sandy island in the middle of the Tsiribihina River, next to the city of Belo, which is presented as a separate space between the waters, the forest, and the sky. In order to celebrate the ritual, a temporary village is set up, which is organized into quarters whereby the cardinal points are reversed: the North – which is usually associated with privilege – and the South – which is linked to servitude – are inverted, and during the ritual the sun is believed to rise from the West instead of

[41] Like all rituals, *fitampoha* has also undergone changes and alterations over the long course of its practice. Moreover, colonization played a crucial role in changing the ritual, which was first abolished and then periodized differently (thenceforth it was performed every 10 years and since 1994 every 5). See Ballarin, *Les reliques royales à Madagascar*, 139 n.41.

[42] It is important to stress that there are different versions of the ritual: *fanampoa-be* (in Boeni and Majunga), *tampoke* (among the Masikoro), and *fampandroana* (among the Tanala). A similar ritual is also present in the Imerina, *fandraona* or royal bath, which, notwithstanding the important difference that it is the king himself – and not his royal relics – that is ritually bathed in the river, contains strong parallels with the *fitampoha*. On the underlying unity of these rituals, see Ballarin, *Les Reliques royales à Madagascar*, 151–7, and Molet, *Le bain royal à Madagascar*, who also argues that the royal bath is a sort of Malagasy national holiday. See, also, Bloch, "The Ritual of the Royal Bath in Madagascar." On the *fanampoa-be*, see Lambek, "The Great Service." My analysis of *fitampoha* is mainly based on Lombard, "Le Fitampoha."

the East. As we shall see, this reversal is meant to re-enact the mythical creation of the world by God.

On the Thursday preceding the official start of the ceremony, an ox is sacrificed in front of the sanctuary that houses the royal relics (*zomba*). The guardian of the reliquaries then designates the bearers (*mpibaby*) who will be responsible for carrying the sacred relics. They are chosen from among the members of the *tompon-tany* groups who, as we have seen, represent the indigenous inhabitants, those who have guaranteed the well-being of the nascent kingdom by entrusting the first woman to the founding king. Here, as in many other aspects of the ceremony, it is possible to notice how the structure of the ritual rests on the symbolism of origin: the various liturgies are in fact intended to rekindle the link between present and past, ritual and myth, visible world and invisible world (i.e., the ancestors).

Friday is the official starting day of the ceremony: the guardian of the reliquaries leads the procession toward the islet, followed by the bearers of *regalia* aligned according to the royal genealogy – i.e., from the reliquary of the first founder-king to the most recent one – and by women of noble origin carrying other ritual objects. The procession is followed by all the other members of the society. Apart from Monday and Wednesday, which are inauspicious days (*fady*) in which celebrations are not allowed, the festival continues throughout the week with songs, dances, music, games, sacrifices and trances. On the Thursday night preceding the royal bath, another symbolic and ritual inversion takes place: *valabe*, that is, a period of intoxication and sexual license aimed at overthrowing

the social order and its hierarchies before re-establishing them through the royal bath the following day. Here is a description from an observer's account:

> At some point in the night, all the lights were turned off. From that moment on, all social barriers and prohibitions were lifted: slaves could unite with someone from the noble caste, or even with someone from the royal family, if not with the king himself; wives could give themselves entirely to another man without the risk of incurring the slightest reproach from their husbands – moreover, husbands had the same right vis-à-vis other women. Everyone acted as if the time of everyday life with all its multiple prohibitions (a strongly hierarchized and socialized time) no longer had any hold.[43]

The ceremony lasts seven days and culminates on Friday with the bath of the relics: the procession, in the same order in which it came out of the reliquary, enters the waters of the river; *regalia* are washed one at a time following once again the royal genealogy and placed to dry in containers finely decorated for the occasion; they are then sprinkled with the fat of the ox sacrificed on the Thursday before the start of the ceremony. Finally, on Saturday, *regalia* are returned to the *doany*, the dedicated building where royal relics are kept for the rest of the year.

This brief description of *fitampoha* allows us to highlight its essential characteristics. As we have seen, it is a collective ritual in which the whole of

[43] Mangalaza, "Un aspect du Fitampoha: le valabe", 311.

society participates.[44] The strong hierarchization of roles that characterizes the ceremony is opposed by the liturgical inversion of order: the utopian representation of the island, the reversal of the cardinal points of the village, the orgiastic night, all act as catalysts for disorder. These "liminal events" reconstruct the original maelstrom which, by suspending historical time, reopens the space-time of the mythical origin.[45] The ritual bath follows this logic: the bearers of relics, who are descendants of the groups that gave birth to the kingdom, rekindle their original blood ties by immersing *regalia* in the flow of water and time. This return to the origin serves to reconstruct the founding pact between God and the kingdom, and to reactivate the bond with the primal powers of the ancestors.

The similarities between *fitampoha* and the many New Year's festivals that articulate the life of traditional societies have not escaped scholars' attention.[46] In fact, this festival is also part of the universal ritual complex of re-foundation of the life cycle: it is a typical celebration of renewal, performed in a period of economic and social crisis – i.e., the dry season that follows the harvest of the first fruits[47] – through which historical time and political order are suspended in order to be regenerated.[48] As Mircea Eliade argues, in traditional societies the "divisions of time are determined by the rituals that govern the renewal of alimentary

[44] As Lombard noted, "Le *fitampoha* ou bain des reliques royales", 1: this ritual "offers us a real reading grid … to approach the deep identity of the Sakalava society."

[45] These events can be defined as "liminal areas of space and time" in the sense popularized by Turner in *The Ritual Process*.

[46] Mangalaza, "Un aspect du Fitampoha: le valabe", 315–6.

[47] It has been suggested that *fitampoha* may have originally been a festival of the first fruits. See Ballarin, *Les reliques royales à Madagascar*, 143. Bloch emphasized the cyclical and annual characters of *fandraona* in Imerina. See Bloch, "The Ritual of the Royal Bath in Madagascar."

[48] The best study on this subject is still, I believe, Lanternari, *La grande festa.*

reserves; that is, the rituals that guarantee the continuity of the life of the community in its entirety."[49] This constant tension toward the mythical origin would show the anti-historical ontology – what Eliade calls "nostalgia of origins" – that is typical of archaic societies, and which constantly push them to enact rituals for the abolition of time.[50] It is this "terror of history" that, according to the Romanian historian, brings about an eternal return *ab origine*: "the New Year … is a repetition of the mythical moment of the passage from chaos to cosmos."[51]

Despite its undoubted appeal, this ontological interpretation has been sharply criticized. Vittorio Lanternari, for example, considers it without any historical foundation. For him, New Year's festivals, such as *fitampoha*, phenomenologically represent an orgiastic flight from history and the world and are therefore cultural expressions of a condition of crisis. From a functionalist perspective, however, they serve to save the immanent and profane values of life. In fact, the structure of these rituals corresponds perfectly to the socio-economic structure of the societies in which they are performed.[52] Most importantly, Lanternari highlighted how the most characteristic trait of the New Year's festivals in agrarian civilizations with segmental social stratification appears to be the theme of social unification and the presence of a sacred or divine king.[53] In Madagascar, this presence takes the form of the dual and dialectical relationship between sovereign and *regalia* that we have described above. It is this dualism, and its permanence within the Malagasy society, that needs to be explained,

[49] Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 51.

[50] "This eternal return reveals an ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming." Ibid., 89.

[51] Ibid., 54.

[52] Lanternari, *La grande festa*, 547.

[53] Ibid., 527.

because if it is true, as has been suggested, that the concept of function does not explain the specificity of ritual, it is no less true that ritual per se is unable to account for its own permanence and diffusion.[54] In other words, how can the centrality and specificity of the king within the social structure of the ritual be explained? What is the profound meaning of the dialectic between king and *regalia*, power and its representation? An initial attempt to answer these questions is developed in the next section.

Crisis of Presence and Presentification of the Invisible

In his reconstruction of the anointing and coronation rituals of French kings in the cathedral of Reims, Jacques Le Goff shows how this centuries-old liturgy functioned as a "memory apparatus" which shaped French identity and history: "Each new anointing re-created the previous ones. … [T]he ceremony revolved around the idea of repetition, of identification of history with memory: through the recapitulation of archaic ritual, the monarchy sought to fix French society in time."[55] In this case, too, the French coronation ceremony performs a temporal suspension which, by rekindling the link with origin and myth, establishes a continuity between monarchy, collective memory and historical identity.[56] Within this dynamic, the sovereign, with his body and symbolic garments, becomes the

[54] Bloch, "The Ritual of the Royal Bath in Madagascar", 208.

[55] Le Goff, "Reims, City of Coronation", 194.

[56] According to Le Goff, "Clovis's baptism became not just a legend but a myth: a myth of origin, the founding myth of French national memory." Just like in *fitampoha*, this "mythical origin" is constantly reactivated through the rituals of anointing and coronation which re-establish a continuity with the ancestors: "Reims was meant to exhibit clearly the idea that Clovis and Charlemagne were direct ancestors of the king of France." Ibid., 198, 210.

pivot of a "liturgical memory" which, just like in the royal ceremonies in Madagascar discussed above, is periodically reactivated.

It would be wrong, however, to think that these rituals are staged simply in order to crystallize an "image" of power. Le Goff warns that the theatrical aspects of the ceremony were not inherent to it, but perceived as such only when, with the advent of modernity, the anointing ritual was dissociated from the historical movement and the social body, thus losing its liturgical and celebratory strength.[57] To understand, then, the profound meaning of this rite, it is necessary to analyze its performative power and ordering function. In fact, Le Goff was among the first to notice the similarities between the rituals of Reims and those of regeneration that characterize some African kingdoms, such as *fitampoha* in Madagascar. As he argued:

> Even if the resemblance between the Reims rituals and the initiation rites still observable in certain sacred monarchies in Africa became attenuated over time, what took place in Reims until 1825 was the rebirth of a people and a kingdom through the anointing and coronation of a new king in rites intended to ensure the replenishment of the sacred forces necessary for the continued life of the "national" community, forces that can also be called

[57] What Chateaubriand wrote about the coronation of Charles X in 1825 is symptomatic of the modern sensitivity: "the current coronation will be the representation of a coronation, not the real thing." Ibid., 245. It is equally relevant to note that, over time, the people will be increasingly reduced to the role of passive spectators: "By the thirteenth century, the royal *ordo* and ceremonial made it clear that popular consensus, traditionally necessary for royal consecration, remained only as a vestigial part of the ritual, vaguely symbolized by the practice of having two bishops go to the door of the cathedral to ask for the acclamation of the crowd in a parody of consultation that left no room for either liberty or surprise." Ibid., 215. This breaking of the ritual into two parts that cannot be reassembled – royal representation and the absent crowd – marks the crucial difference, in this writer's opinion, between the royal rituals of the Malagasy tradition and those of the late Middle Ages.

economic (the king was responsible for the nation's prosperity) and political, or, in a broader sense, vital.[58]

Le Goff's analysis brings to mind that of Arthur Hocart on the original function of sovereignty, that is, of the king's body conceived as the fulcrum on which the social order and its regeneration rests.[59] According to this perspective, the sovereign would not be the center of a Hobbesian and theatrical representation but rather of a drama of social and metaphysical forces.[60] It is in this sense that Maurice Bloch is able to say that annual rituals, like the royal bath, are mechanisms that perform ordering functions: they mediate between social conflicts and metaphysical tensions, i.e., between the contradictions caused by forms of legitimation of authority by reference to a transcendental order.[61] In other words, the king would be the mediator between transcendence and immanence – the metaphysical source of authority and social dynamics – and the necessity of his role would last as long as the society of which he is an expression unproblematically reflects itself in this dualistic metaphysics.

Bloch and Hocart's studies have the undoubted merit of highlighting, from different perspectives, the centrality of kingship within a specific metaphysics of social order. Yet the high-low axis that the king, as a mediator, symbolically designs and occupies with his own body does not exhaust his function. As we

[58] Ibid., 217.

[59] Hocart, *Kingship*, 24: "the invention of man who did not work with his hands, but merely existed and acted on his environment at a distance, like the sun, was one of the most momentous in the history of man; it was nothing less than the invention of government."

[60] See Grottanelli, "Kingship: An Overview."

[61] Bloch, "The Ritual of the Royal Bath in Madagascar", 210.

have seen in the case of the royal relics in Madagascar, one of the most important characteristics attributed to sovereign representations is precisely that of guaranteeing the continuity of the kingdom through a reactivation of the origin's power (the ancestors, the divinity). The king is therefore not only at the center of a metaphysical axis that ideally connects transcendence and immanence, but also, and above all, of a temporal horizon that recovers mythical time (i.e., origin) in historical time, as underlined by Le Goff. What is, then, the relationship between origin and its actualization in the royal body? Why does this relationship need doubles, representations of power, such as relics? And, more generally, what kind of "center" is the king?

In reference to the use of royal relics in Madagascar, Jacques Lombard speaks of the "presentification of the divine".[62] For, among the Sakalavas, as we have seen, royal power is considered of divine origin but embodied in the various relics that form *a chain of presences* that connects the mythical time with the living ruler, the transcendent world of the ancestors with the worldly kingdom. The key to understanding the function of the Malagasy kingship, and of its multiple bodies, lies in this dialectic of presence and absence on which it rests: relics actualize mythical time, just as the king reactivates, through his own body, the invisible and transcendent powers that legitimize his authority. In this way, the various bodies of the king (his natural body and his remains, i.e., the relics)

[62] Lombard, "Le *fitampoha* ou bain des reliques royales", 2.

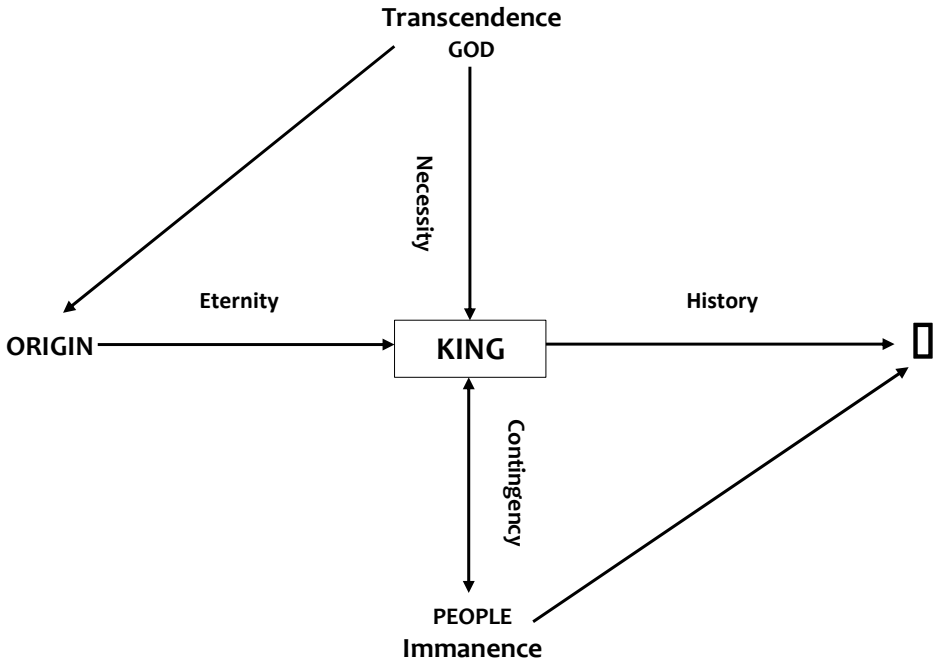
save the world from the "crisis of presence" described so effectively by Ernesto De Martino.[63]

For the Italian anthropologist, what is at stake in traditional societies is a constant "loss of presence": because they are always on the point of disappearing in the flow of time into which they have fallen, traditional communities must thus constantly reconstruct their presence in the world. Archaic political ontology is therefore configured as a constant effort of the cultural transmutation of nature so as not to let it flow unresolved in time: this is precisely the function of the annual festivals like *fitampoha*. From this perspective, then, the cyclical view of history, about which so many have written, cannot be seen simply as a cultural reflection of the daily (day/night), lunar or seasonal cycles. If this were the case, it would not be clear why this cyclicality present in nature needs to be valued and culturally domesticated. Yet, "man has gone further: he has come to think he can *control* that coming and going."[64] And the operative center of this control apparatus is precisely the sovereign body. In other words, the king should not be conceived as an "immobile" center, but rather as the beating heart of a chronotopic mechanism that constantly unites and separates, regenerates and reactivates ancestral and political power, transcendence and immanence, mythical time and social space (see Figure 2). His multiple body is the fruit of these constant cosmo-political tensions.

[63] De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, 345: "The crisis of presence is the risk of not being in the world and, at the same time, the discovery of an order of techniques (to which magic and religion belong) destined to protect presence from the risk of losing the categories with which it places itself above blind vitality and the *ingens sylva* (vast forest) of nature."

[64] Hocart, *Kings and Councillors*, 33.

Figure 2. Kingship as a Chronotopic Apparatus



To quote Bakhtin, then, it could be argued that the king "emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him."[65]

The hypothesis developed in this article is that, far from being only a biopolitical force, sovereignty should be conceived as a chronotopic apparatus, which determines the conditions of possibility for ritual action and collective memory.[66] This "royal mechanism" marks a constant dialogue between past and present, transcendence and immanence, myth and rite through which a society

[65] Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism", 23.

[66] Here I use the Bakhtinian notion of chronotope as developed by Steinby who considers chronotopes not as "categories of cognition but of the possibilities of human action." In this sense, Bakhtin's chronotope should be conceived as a "time and place not in the physical sense but in the sense of the (right) moment for certain kinds of human action." See Steinby, "Bakhtin's Concept of the Chronotope", 122, 116.

may be said to live in the mirror of the past. The various Malagasy liturgies linked to sovereignty are, in other words, like a mirror that periodically reflects the face of the present, showing to itself its own changes. As Lombard argues, by the urgency brought about by the modernity of each era, "*fitampoha* is transformed not so much in its form as in the ideas and images that each one has of it, and this allows a society to communicate with itself as accurately as possible, to live and produce its own history."[67]

In Madagascar, therefore, sovereignty and the liturgies connected to it do not design an enclosure for the capture of life. On the contrary, they create a *lieu de mémoire* where society can constantly mirror itself and build its future. Sovereign power embodies this need for self-representation. It is not simply a force that coerces society, but rather constitutes it, because, by means of representation, it constantly reveals its present soul.

Conclusion

Sovereignty has often been described as a biopolitical power that has its roots in ancient Roman political and legal doctrines. Through an analysis of its liturgical and symbolic forms in western Madagascar, this article has described an alternative paradigm which, challenging Eurocentric reconstructions, allows us to understand some fundamental aspects of sovereign power and the rituals connected to it. The suggestion that sovereignty can be investigated as a chronotopic apparatus should therefore be understood as an ideal type, or paraphrasing Warburg, as a *Machtsformel*, which may help shed light on the

[67] Lombard, "Le *fitampoha* ou bain des reliques royales", 6.

distance and proximity of other phenomena of power in the absence of apparent historical links. As Le Goff has shown, shifting the analytical focus to the symbolic and ritualistic characteristics of sovereignty helps us discover both the permanence of latent functions (such as ordering ones) and the historical peculiarity of the political phenomena investigated (the exclusion, for example, of the people from coronation rituals in medieval France). Thus, if with the advent of modernity the dualism on which the sovereign mechanism rests has been broken, this rift should be explored by focusing not only on the relationship between sacredness and power (i.e., the vertical transcendence-immanence axis, which has often been the subject of investigation), but also on the temporal axis that links historical time to mythical time, the origin to its constant reactualization, and which represents the most intimate performance of authority in traditional societies.

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