

# **Machiavelian Empowerment and Disempowerment**

## **The Violent Struggle for Power in XVIIth Century Ethiopia**

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### **Machiavelli and political theology**

In an article recently published in *Social Anthropology*, the Journal of the *European Association of Social Anthropologists*, anthropologist Adam Kupper has proposed a stimulating approach to the study of power relations in what he refers to as pre-colonial political systems in Africa (Kupper 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 Kupper 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" (Kupper 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" (Kupper 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.

Adam Kupper'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 shun 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 & 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*: Drory & Gluskinos 1980:83-85). This use of Machiavelli's ideas, as detailed in *The Prince*, gives us a valuable hint to what can be the proper setting for Kupper's anthropological reading of that renaissance political analyst: the power game constitutes the interface between collective structures and individual actions, or, as Frederick Barth 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 (Barth 1959:2-3).

Curiously enough, Kupper'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 James George Frazer, in the *Golden Bough* and the *Magical Origin of Kings*<sup>1</sup>. 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"<sup>2</sup>. 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 defines his views, and those of colleagues such as Alfred Adler and Jean-Claude Muller as decidedly "neo-frazeréen" (Heusch 1987a:269,271; 1987b:46-56). If not for any other reason, Adam Kupper'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 Luc 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 article, therefore, I propose to test some of the features of a Machiavellian interpretation of a pre-colonial African sovereignty system<sup>3</sup>, but in a situation where the attribution of a "exotic" quality is not as clear-cut as in the ones researched by Adam Kupper. 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<sup>4</sup>, is an interesting case where the "exotism" of its sovereignty and religious system was, to 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 apart;
- 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 secular, lay state. Can he, then, be of use for 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 Luc De Heusch's (neo-Fraserean) 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 (Heusch 1987:218,256-260). 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 1965:71 ff.), 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<sup>5</sup>. 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 designation of a Jesuit patriarch for Ethiopia<sup>6</sup>. This project was, in fact, the result of an active joint effort of the Roman papacy and the Portuguese crown (Brodrick 1946:237-238) - in the height of a counter-reformation reaction in south-western Europe that favoured the right of spiritual precedence of the Roman Pope over national monarches 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 connexion 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<sup>7</sup>, was a very potent image of a Christmimetic 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 1983:270-284). 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 1959:80 ff.; Ramos 1997a:208 ff.). In the course

of five centuries and up to the seventeenth, we can witness the transformation and eventual eclipse of the Christmimetic character of the Indian priestly king reigning over a perfect society (Ramos, 1997a: I-II; Ramos, 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 1983:529 ff.; Randles 1966:3 ff.). In the Portuguese case, travel around African coasts was also conceptualized within a crusading project which meant to a large extent the penetration of the continent through its water courses (Randles 1960:20-27); 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 the "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 1541-1543). Just a few years later, the first Jesuit missionaries landed in Ethiopia with the prospect of converting the Monophysite Christians and their emperor, that the Portuguese, like most Europeans, still insisted in calling Prester John (Ramos, 1997a: 171 ff.).

In respect to 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 a 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)<sup>8</sup>. But one must nevertheless add that the European (i.e., Jesuit) writings, 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 reaching 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-legitimize - in the eyes of their European readers (specially 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<sup>9</sup>. 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 this 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 imposed that all Christians should convert to Catholicism, and Monophysitism was to be abolished, prohibited and punished with death penalty. 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 1980:211, ff.), must be viewed, in Machiavellian terms, as a mis-judgement and a grave mistake in the political action of an emperor that 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 was, 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 restrained from touching the ground directly, they no longer hid behind curtains and veils in ceremonial sessions. The ritual conditioning rules of imperial succession had been also evidently 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 became under increasing warring pressure from the Somali Muslims, and immediately after from the Galla (the nomadic Oromo pastoralists). Modifications in the administrative and military centralized structure of the empire were reported. Namely, the creation of the king's personal guard and a drafted army were 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* towards the feudal class and the landowning monastic orders (Abir 1980:152-154; Pennec, 1996:143-45,160 ff.). Naturally, this favoured a situation of increased antagonism between the emperor and the nobles and 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, the feudal lords were, in the beginning of the seventeenth century, loosing 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 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, led, as a young man, a nomadic raiding life and knew quite well Galla-Oromo politics. When he came forward with his claim to substitute the appointed emperor Yakob, he had a very good chance to win the succession conflict. Although his legitimacy was questionable (being only the cousin of a previous *Negus*), he presented better credits 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 1980:194-196). His steps towards legitimacy took various forms: he apparently succeeded in sustaining Galla invasions and imposing himself as a war-lord 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 (specially 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 Portuguese/Catholic small community, and the group (of not more than twenty at any time) of Jesuit priests, became instrumental for Susinyus. To counter-balance the Ethiopian clergy's power, to obtain western weapons and military assistance and to introduce foreign technologies seemed to be a pre-condition to securing a radical political reform in the sovereignty system (see S. B. Chernetsov, in Pennec 1996:143). He also frequently exploited the tribal divergences 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 conditioned to a prior conversion of the emperor and of the Monophysite subjects to Catholicism, as well as the immediate abandon 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 which Machiavelli warns very explicitly "princes" against: 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"<sup>10</sup>, were careful to omit, was that in any case the Portuguese were at this time unable to bring forward any assistance (the Portuguese no longer were an important power in the Indian ocean region) (Abir 1980:185-187). One could wonder if, 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 decrees and the abdication of the Emperor minimally altered this situation.

Fasilidas, the chosen emperor's 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 1929:245-246; Pennec, 1996:170 ff.; Teles 1660:352-366). 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 that 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 1980:231-233).

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 to even hold by force the imperial control over the Cushitic and Muslin 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), and 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 is aware of this fact, when he reminds 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 we 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 - apply, at least partly, to imperial Ethiopia (Haberland 1965:71; Heusch 1983:23-28). If that can be 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 emperors 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 illusive 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 *fuite en avant*, to use the french expression - can be considered as a manifestation of the tyrant's will to assert his power. This actions can be understood as leading to an abortive creation of a new system of sovereignty, inspired on 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 Christmimetism (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 - seemed 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 1980:224-226). This action backfired and eventually resulted in persecutions against the Catholic.

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 wouldn't show sufficient results in defending the country from external threats (by then, the main flux of Galla-Oromo peoples). The obvious mis-understanding and symmetry of intentions and expectations that characterized Jesuits / Susinyus relations 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 hexogenous. As to the Jesuit priests that successively starred the process of conversion of the emperor and his family, and were behind the already mentioned submission decree: their motivations seemed to be an equally desperate attempt of saving, not the real empire of Ethiopia, but an imaginary one. In due course, the Jesuit fathers

found at their own expense that Ethiopian 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 "civilized" 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 in planning and building a western style church and palace for Susinyus, and his influence in the *Negus'* decision of founding a fixed capital are important hints that the Jesuits were, as it was, 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 substitute. 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* that ruled over Christians, Jews, muslim, and pagan people alike. Like the *Abun*, the emperor was also considered a foreigner. Their relation was that of two structurally opposed representatives of foreign civilizations: the *Negus*, that 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, this was felt by most as an absurdity and pure devilish malignity (Pereira 1892:259).

Fasilidas, Susinyus' son, aimed at appeasing the enormous tensions between Amharic and Tigrinean 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 consequences, for it couldn't at all prevent the actual regression of imperial, and generally Christian, rule over Ethiopian affairs - now dominated by Galla-Oromo influence<sup>11</sup>. Symmetrically, in the perspective of the disempowered Jesuits, Prester John was finally dead (Lobo 1971:786-789). The tentative identification between Prester John and the Ethiopian ruler became actively denied

in their writings: not, as before the persecution, as an ambiguous pre-condition for their pretensions of self-legitimation in European courtly and ecclesiastical circles (specially in their confrontation with the Dominican order, in Italy and the Iberian peninsula), but in definitely negative terms, as the discursive reflexion of the violent disempowerment they suffered, from 1631 until their final expulsion.

### **Final note**

A purely dichotomic 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 here presented, we are primarily dealing with a quantity of literary documents produced by the Jesuit missionaries, with mainly self-legitimizing intentions. In order to categorize the conflicting and uncontrolled Ethiopian reality, they systematically qualified 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 demonized and categorized as alien, in Ethiopian eyes. This "exotic situation" give us a compelling example of the consubstantial quality of a relation where "sameness" and the "otherness" are overlapping categories.

So, to understand, in a "Machiavellian-Frazerean" 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 equalitarian society, teleologically guessing the dangers of sacralizing central power - the simultaneously sacred and evil character of the sovereign - creates a overwhelming system of ritual and ideological constraints to limit his power (Heusch 1987a:271,291). Luc de Heusch's interpretation of the mystical power of the sovereign - the source of his/her sacrality -, doesn't unfortunately incorporate an element that never-the-less seemed obvious to both Machiavelli and Frazer: the quality of mystification - as a source of the power game. As to Adam Kupper, his unawareness of the importance of the ritual and ideological constraints whereupon the leader's actions are to be perceived, seems a unnecessary weakening of his Machiavellian perspective, and one that Machiavelli himself wouldn't probably have approved.

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 planed association with foreigners, and namely with Europeans (the *ferenjoch*). This feature should alert us to the possibility of conceptualizing the mythical and historical usurpers' self-legitimizing 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 polarized 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 pre-condition to

envision a (cyclical) renewal of society and of the imperial institution, which warrants their perpetual interdependence.

This feature, which A. R. Radcliffe-Brown has in another context described as an "association of contraries" or an "union of opposites" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:18,20), 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 recognize 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.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Even if one could, naturally, direct at Adam Kupper's proposal the same sort of reproach that Alfred Adler directs at E. Evans-Pritchard: that he empties the ritual content of the institution of sacral sovereignty, reducing it to a system of competition for power (Adler 1982:265).

<sup>2</sup> 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 mis-use of the laws of causation) to acquire and accumulate personal power, that reverts to the general good of society - the "credulous fellows" (Frazer 1920:82-83; 1978:80-81,109).

<sup>3</sup> In truth, a historical conjuncture in an African non-colonized nation.

<sup>4</sup> Itself an ecclesiastical "corporate group" recurrently perceived or identified as politically Machiavellian, and rather 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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).

<sup>6</sup> To the point that the original draft of the Society's *Constitutions*, which forbade that its members accepted 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).

<sup>7</sup> See the compilation of the *Epistola Johannes Presbyter*, with inclusion of the Latin versions of interpolations in: Zarncke, 1879:909-924.

<sup>8</sup> 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, 1996:153-160.

<sup>9</sup> It's 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, this necessarily reflects a dominant status on the level of social structure. The making of a self-empowering discourse can frequently be a tacit recognition of a disempowered condition.

<sup>10</sup> As a personality disposition, Machiavellianism is intimately connected with a high capability of ingratiation in interpersonal relations (cf. Pandey & Rastogi, 1979).