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Sacred Kingship and Political Power in Ancient Rwanda

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Abstract

This article revisits the sacred kingship in ancient Rwanda. The existing literature presented it as either obvious or doubtful. Using local sources and exploring theories related to sacred kingship, we argue that the kingship in Rwanda was sacred. We also identify the role that this sacred kingship played in the processes of unification the territory of Rwanda, creation of material culture, origins and consolidation of the kingship and the kingdom. The most important role of the sacred kingship appears to have been mainly the legitimization of the King's power. We use documentary research and the historical method to present and discuss the following narratives related to the Rwandan kingdom: the tale of origins or the myth of Kigwa, the royal ideology during the reign of Mibambwe III Sentabyo, Gihanga seen as the Incarnation of the Sacred Kingship, the sacrality of Power as source of legitimacy of King Ruganzu II Ndori, and the role of the sacred kingdom through the rituals of the royal court known as Ubwiru.

Key words: Rwandan sacred kingship, power rituals, Rwandan history

1. Introduction

At the eve of the 20th century, the territory of Rwanda was ruled by the royal court of the Nyiginya dynasty with Karinga as the dynastic drum. Some scholars accept, as if it were obvious, that the Rwanda kingship was sacred (Kagame 1975; D'Hertefeldt & Coupez 1964; Vansina 2001). However, Back (1981) questioned the sacredness of the kingship of Rwanda. He doubted this system, given the limited power of the Rwandan kings in the 19th and 20th centuries. This argument is one of the conclusions that he considered to be preliminary hypotheses that could lead to further research.

The research problem of this article is to verify, on the basis of available sources, whether or not that royalty was sacred. The first hypothesis argues that the ancient Rwanda kingship was sacred. The second hypothesis favours the questioning of this system as Back did. The objective of the study is to collect the materials and analyse them in a perspective of the research problem as well as the hypothesis and the theoretical framework. It discusses the sacredness of the kingship and its role in the political ideology building.

2. Theoretical Framework

Sacred kingship is among concepts that have been hard to define. Balandier (1996) argues that the sacred does not lend itself to a single definition. On the other hand, Westermann (2015) defines it as a political

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and religious concept by which a leader is perceived as an incarnation, a manifestation, a mediator or an agent of the sacred. Power becomes sacred when religion is connected to the whole existence of both the individual and the community and when a kingdom is inseparable from religious institutions. In the same vein, Dehouve (1973) states that sacred kingship is based on the belief that collective survival and prosperity depend on the royal institution. In addition to this power-religion tandem, sacredness is also linked to the social fabric. Here the sacred is understood as what is traditional, which belongs to the transcendental truth and what members of society consider as such, that is to say, as sacred. The production process of the sacred identifies the social actors who construct it, convey it and perpetuate it (Evans, 2003).

Balandier believes that traditional societies are so numerous that their implementation of the sacred does not submit itself to a theory of the sacred that would be capable of reducing this multiplicity without abusing it. In contrast, Westermann believes that each case of the sacred form of government can be studied through its historical, social and religious contexts. Westermann distinguishes three forms of sacred kingship, namely the possession of supernatural power, a divine king, and an agent of the sacred.

3. Material and methods

The study materials are Rwandan oral traditions that were recorded in writing. These include dynastic poems, *Ibisigo*, royal rituals, *Inzira z'ubwiru* as well as historical tales *Ibitekerezo*. Dynastic poetry is a collection of poems that often eulogize Rwandan kings' real or supposed exploits. Those poems had been collected and studied mainly by Kagame since 1936 (Kagame 1951, 1969) and Rugamba (1987). They are of particular interest for this study since they often, if not always, convey the ideology of kingship.

Royal rituals have been defined as “standardized procedures that are intended to implement the ‘superhuman’ abilities attributed to the sovereign, to confer upon him those powers at his advent, or to preserve them during his reign” (D’Hertefelt & Coupez 1964: 3). Those procedures are contained in texts that detail knowledge about essential rites. Although allusive, those texts are interesting to the extent that they reveal the role attributed to the sacred kingship.

As a source of historical information, Vansina (2000b) realised that royal rituals *ubwiru*, as they had been published, reflect the beliefs and practices of the second half of the nineteenth century, even though this chronological position may be nuanced by the fact that the beliefs and practices of *Ubwiru* could also be confirmed for earlier periods, including the epoch of Ndori’s reign in the 17th century, according to his chronology (Vansina 2001). Apart from that, the importance of those rites as sources of history is seen in the following statement by Balandier: “the sacred implies myth, which is its explanation, and rite, which is its implementation” (1996: 12).

Historical tales *ibitekerezo*, have been published by Coupez and Kamanzi (1962), Smith (1978) and Vansina (2000a). The approach used by Vansina seems more stimulating than that of his colleagues, since not only did he conduct a systematic collection of those tales between 1958 and 1962, but he also made an interesting analysis in some details. At the same time, Vansina criticized other researchers for not using his collection even though it was not widely disseminated. Moreover, the collection of documents on *ibitekerezo* he thought was still available in Butare city in Rwanda was nowhere to be found. He believes that those tales are the pillar of history for the kingdom of Rwanda that he unambiguously refers to as the “nyiginya kingdom.” He draws attention to the fact that many writers relied on those tales to write their syntheses, including Kagame who allegedly did not explicitly value those tales. The heroes in those tales appear to be kings, queen-mothers and queens, princes, diviners and warriors. From this point of view, they would be interesting for this study.

In this article, we used the documentary research method. We collected written documents containing data that is relevant to address the research problem. Our main references were the tale of origins or the myth of Kigwa, Gihanga seen as the incarnation of the Sacred Kingship, the role of the sacred kingdom through the rituals of the royal court known as *Ubwiru*, the sacrality of Power as source of legitimacy of King Ruganzu II Ndori, and the royal ideology during the reign of Mibambwe III Sentabyo. The historical method was

used to create narrations and analyses or discussions of the sacred character of the pre-colonial Rwandan kingdom. In the next section, we present results in a narrative way, then we discuss our findings in the following section.

4. Results

4.1. The Tale of Origins or the Myth of Kigwa

The origin of kingship in Rwanda refers to two successive founders, Kigwa and Gihanga, almost like Kintu and Kimera in the case of Buganda. But in this section, we will limit ourselves to the episode of Kigwa (also called Sabizeze). Kigwa is a descendant of Nkuba (also known as Shyerezo). He was born in a supernatural way in “the country from above”, *mu gihugu cyo hejuru*: the heart of a sacrificial bull is hidden in a jar made of erythrin wood, *umuko*, in which milk was regularly poured. That operation led, at the end of nine months, to the birth of a boy, named Kigwa (Kagame 1943: 61). But his father did not deign to recognize him as his son. Thanks to an indiscretion, the son eventually came to know about his origins. Irritated against his mother Gasani, Kigwa left the “above” world and landed in the area that he called Rwanda, in the former kingdom of Mubari, in the north-east of the current Rwanda. That kingdom was ruled by King Kabeja belonging to a lineage of the Bazigaba clan that gave hospitality to the newcomer. Kabeja's daughter or granddaughter named Nyirarukangaga married Kigwa or a descendant of him, named Kazi. They gave birth to Gihanga, the acclaimed founder of the kingdom of Rwanda. That group of individuals descended from heaven are called *Ibimanuka* (Kagame 1972, Coupez and Kamanzi 1962, Chrétien 1999).

4.2. Gihanga seen as the Incarnation of the Sacred Kingship

Together with his cousins called *Ubukara* reputedly skilful in the consultation of spirits, Gihanga embarked from Mubari or Mutara in the current district of Nyagatare, on an adventure that would lead to the unification of political entities that were scattered on the space that was to become Rwanda. From this starting point, he passed through Gasabo in the current district of Gasabo. He then married Nyirampirangwe, daughter of the king of Bungwe, in the present district of Huye. He then went back to Bunyambiriri in the present district of Nyamagabe, flushed out a white antelope *Ingabe* that he pursued in Kinyaga, in the current districts of Rusizi and Nyamasheke, where he married Nyangobero, daughter of Ngabo, the local king.

From there he went back to Bugoyi, in the present district of Rubavu, at King Jeni's land. Jeni was son of Rurenge. There Gihanga married Nyamususa, Jeni's daughter and his maid Nyirampingiye. Then he went to Buhanga in the current Musanze district where he built a residence. Guided by Jeni's ritualist named Rubunga, he made the royal drum *Rwoga* from wood and introduced the royal ritual called *ubwiru*. From Buhanga, Gihanga went to Kibari where he founded several capitals and completed his adventure at Nyamirembe of Humure in the present district of Nyagatare where he made his will. He bequeathed Bushi and Bufurero to Kanyabungo, born from Nyirangobero.

He left Bushubi to Gashubi, son of Nyirampirangwe. He bequeathed Ndorwa to Kanyandorwa, Bugesera to Kanyabugesera and Rwanda to Gahima Kanyarwanda, all three were born from Nyamususa. From Nyirampirangwe was also born Rutsoke, who received Gisaka, but renounced it, preferring to keep the symbolic kingship of *Ubwiru* (Kagame, 1943). Another version reveals that Gihanga flushed out the antelope in Burundi and that thanks to the advice from the diviners *Ubukara*, he had to run after it to a terminal where he would find a wife who would be useful to him (Coupez and Kamanzi 1962). Through this legend, we also find the role of sacred kingship in the construction of the royal ideology in Rwanda: to find the Rwandan territory, to inaugurate crafts and hunting, and to inaugurate the cow and the drum.

4.3. Gihanga, the “founder” of the Rwandan Kingdom

Traveling throughout the entities called countries or *ibihugu*, Gihanga made the act of ‘founding’, because he symbolically delimited a geographical space by the influence of his passage on the spot. By completing his trip, he assigned the limits of the territory he has just ‘founded’. This hold on the territory was not made by arms, but by matrimonial alliances with the kings he found on the spot. He chose his wives in royal houses with the aim of allying the local powers. In spite of the project of conquering foreign countries as depicted in dynastic poetry and in the texts of the rituals, Gihanga's legend conveys the idea of a uniqueness of Rwanda which is achieved peacefully by marriage. It embodies the ideology of social cohesion.

4.4. Gihanga “Inaugurated” Crafts and Hunting

Gihanga is also depicted as a ‘civilizing hero’. He introduced woodworking, blacksmithing and pottery as well as hunting, as suggested by the following passages:

After arriving there (Burundi), Gihanga began to hunt; he decorated; he decorated skins and offered them to the king; he made pottery and offered it to the king; he forged bracelets and offered them to the king; he forged spears and offered them to the king (Coupez & Kamanzi 1962: 71).

When he got at Jeni’s place in north-west of the current Rwanda, Gihanga pursued his forging activities: “He forged rings *ibitare*, he forged spears, he forged bracelets *indagayija*, similar to those rings. He forged and everything he forged was offered to Jeni” (Coupez and Kamanzi, 1962: 73). It is thanks to the forging trade that he managed to attract Nyamususa, the alleged future mother of Kanyarwanda and others: “On her side, the young girl, learning those things, learning how Gihanga forges the awls that weave small baskets and bracelets *ibitare* and copper rings worn on arms, learning that, she says: ‘By what means will I get to that man?’” (Coupez & Kamanzi 1962: 73).

When he got at Buhanga, in north of the current Rwanda, Gihanga let the local population benefit from his artisanal productions and introduced the hunting trade:

While people from that region were financially embarrassed, he managed to get them out of poverty; while they worked the land with sticks, they had their hoes helved; while they used their hands, they received billhooks: he hunted, he taught how to hunt to those who did not know how to do it. Gihanga accomplished those activities. As they used to fetch water, he made jugs for them. I told you that this is the reason why he is called Gihanga; it is because he has invented activities which are performed by all men, including wood making, pottery, hunting, metallurgy; all that was accomplished by Gihanga; all who carry out those activities, they got those skills from him (Coupez and Kamanzi 1962: 75).

Handicraft and hunting are among the essential attributes of Gihanga. Whether in Mubari where he was born, in Burundi or Burwi where he took Nyirampirangwe as a wife, or in Rwerere where he met Nyamususa, or in Buhanga where he seems to have resided for a long time, Gihanga dealt with craft and hunting techniques. He is a character who ‘inaugurated’ a cultural practice, a ‘civilizing hero’ who ‘founded’ cultural elements and got others to benefit from them. It is under that sign that he is identified in Buhanga where he taught trade skills to the population.

4.5. Gihanga “Inaugurated” The Cow and the Drum

The fact that Gihanga settled down at Buhanga and Mutara has earned him the laudatory formula of “Gihanga, who has inaugurated the cow and the drum,” *Gihanga cyahanze inka n'ingoma* (Kagame, 1972: 39). The meaning that Kagame assigns to *ingoma* ‘drum’ is in relation to sacred kingship. For him, the term *ingoma* symbolizes kingdom and dynasty as well as royalty. This suggests that Gihanga created the kingdom by his trips that he created the kingship by carving the Rwoga drum out of wood and especially

by collecting *ubwiru* from the Barenge dynasty, and finally, that he created dynasties by bequeathing kingdoms to his sons.

4.6. The Role of the Sacred Kingdom through the Rituals of the Royal Court known as Ubwiru

The royal ritual *Ubwiru* consists of eighteen pieces, called *Inzira* or “methods”, that is to say the process followed to perform royal ceremonies. But those were rites designed to implement the king’s ‘supernatural’ capabilities in order to ensure his power, the security of the country and its economic prosperity. Let us illustrate this through the ritual of enthronement, *Inzira y'ubwimika*. This ritual was intended to transmit to the new king the ‘supernatural’ capacities already mentioned. The sacredness of a king was supposed to be inherited from his father, that is why the funeral rites of the late king were incorporated into the enthronement ceremonial of the new king, as if it were a handover process like the one, we see in the current administration. Then the new king received the dynastic insignia in two new residences dedicated to the spirit of his father and grandfather. That rite was supposed to ensure dynastic continuity through the transmission of the ‘seed and fertility’ as indicated in a dynastic poem, *Ukwibyara*, ‘to incarnate in one’s descendent’ dedicated to King Mutara II Rwogera:

Those who transmitted you the seed and the fertility
Bequeathed you the royal cows
Grazing in Kinanira and Ngoma
At the source of goods at Muremure (Kagame, 1951: 65)

The candidate received his drum *Indamutsa* whose beat announced the beginning and the closing of the daily political activities. He then learned how to produce fire, to forge, to sow, to do justice and to wage war by defending the country and attacking foreign countries.

The King as blacksmith
870 A fire is made to light with the said wisp of grass from all over the
country
He (the king) gets up and goes to the inner courtyard
[...]
He has a forge set up in the inner courtyard
He girds a sheepskin war loincloth
And actuate the bellows four times (D'Hertefelt et Coupez, 1964: 263).

The King as sower
895 The king picks up the couch grass and sows the seeds
He then tasks the Tsoobe
With collecting couch grass and sowing seeds
The latter tasks the descendant from Myaka
With picking up the couch grass
900 The king sows the seeds of the second day (D'Hertefelt et Coupez,
1964: 263-4).

The king as supreme judge
1085 Their king receives two cows,
Immediately after, a descendant from Byinshi
Comes to complain about cows
Accompanied by a bull
He loses his case and is beaten
Without making him bleed (D'Hertefelt et Coupez, 1964: 273)

1135 Karinga arrives
 The pure descendant of Nyabirungu presents him
 Saying, "Here is the drum your father has passed on to you:
 May it defeat Burundi for you
 [...]

He is asked, "Will you accept it?"
 The king answers, "I will accept it"
 He is asked, "If it is attacked, will you fight for it?"
 He replies, "If he is attacked, I will fight for it."
 We ask, "If we need you, will you lose
 blood for it? [will you succumb for it?]"
 He replies, "I will lose blood for it, I
 [will succumb for it]"
 Then it is presented to him by being posed
 On his knees and on his palms
 And it was said, "It is yours, accept it" (D'Hertefelt & Coupez, 1964:231)

4.7. The Sacrality of Power as Source of Legitimacy of King Ruganzu II Ndori

While the Rwandan kingdom was at the mercy of deadly attacks from Lake Kivu and the region of volcanoes, King Ndahiro II Cyamatare, feeling that he would succumb to those attacks, sent his young son Ndori to his sister Nyabunyana who had married Karemera Ndagara, a king of Karagwe, in the west of the current Tanzania. Cyamatare was ambushed by his enemies in the current district of Ngororero, in the west of the current Rwanda. As it was expected, Ndori had to return to recover his kingdom (Pagès, 1933, Coupez and Kamanzi, 1962, Kagame, 1972). One episode of his imaginary exploits as narrated in tales indicates that when he arrived in Rwanda, miracles on land fertility took place, proving that he was the real or legitimate king:

When he arrived in Urwanda, he entered the enclosure of a man called Minyaruko, son of Nyamikenke. He spoke near the entrance - it was night time. Hearing him, Minyaruko asked, "Who is the man who is calling me at night?" The other replied: "It is Ndori, Ruganzu." Minyaruko said again: "Do not make fun of me. It would be good news if it was him." At that moment, Minyaruko suddenly heard his cow in the enclosure calving. He heard the chickens under the bed hatching their eggs. He woke up and said: "Actually, it's the king, it's really Ruganzu [...]. After he had recovered the drums, the drum was placed in an open place, the drum resonated. As it was being beaten, all the Rwandan people came running saying to themselves: "The king has arrived. People came. It was there that they recognized Ruganzu in person, after his return to that country. They accepted Ruganzu as their king. He received cows; chiefs accepted him as their king, all those who had remained alive and had not died. When he was accepted as the king, he rejoiced. (Coupez and Kamanzi 1962: 79-81)

It is clear that it is a posthumous account composed to legitimize Ndori by attributing to him the kingship whose role was notably to guarantee the fertility and the prosperity of the country. This invention is corroborated by mentioning the dynastic name of Ruganzu borne by Ndori whereas he was not yet enthroned.

4.8. King Mibambwe III Sentabyo Faces his Opponents

King Mibambwe III Sentabyo's short reign at the end of the 18th century was marked by a competitive struggle for the throne. At the beginning of the reign, probably in 1796, the king faced opposition from his

brothers, Gatarabuhura and Gasenyi, who sought to overthrow him (Kagame 1972, Vansina 2001). Poets of the court found an opportunity to recall the political ideology of kingship (Kagame 1951). In this regard, the poem *Umwami si umuntu* “The king is not a man” attributed to the poet Semidogoro is very revealing of the sacredness of that kingship. It is worth highlighting the most salient points of the poem: the king is distinguished from ordinary mortals; he is portrayed as the intermediary between God and men. By virtue of this new identity, the king goes beyond social categorizations.

The King is not a Man
 O men he has enriched with his cows
 The Sovereign, Winged, descent from Leopard
 He is a man before his appointment to the throne
 But once appointed, he differs from the ordinary nobility
 And he obtains a special status (Kagame 1951: 53)
 [...]
 The King is God
 And he dominates over humans
 [...]
 This King only resembles men;
 He resembles them by the skin and not by the heart (Kagame 1951: 53 - 56).

In other extracts, the poet alludes to the fact that the King occupies an intermediary position between God and men:

I contemplate God in this house
 I notice that he is the God accessible to our supplications
 The other God, it is he who knows him
 [...]
 This sovereign drink the milk milked by God
 And we drink the milk he in turn milks for us
 And in Rwamiko the milk is abundant (Kagame, 1951, 54)
 A single cow that calves in his house is a pledge of happiness,
 This protector of us all,
 And those who immigrate from abroad
 Are also fully satiated by him
 This King is the only one great responsible
 He who is in charge of a whole country
 Is there any prince of blood?
 Who would accept to be King without appointment?
 Only the designated King performs his duties successfully!
 Nobody can work alone and without help
 In order to give satisfaction to the country
 The legitimate Elect is the only one to fulfil his duties successfully (Kagame 1951: 55).

The poet thus spoke to the king’s opponents, reminding them that the king should not be treated as the common mortal and that, therefore, it was useless to oppose him.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Tale of the Origin or the Myth of Kigwa

Could any forms of sacred kingship as expressed by Westermann be found from the myth? Kigwa has supernatural qualities. He fell from the sky and landed safe and sound in today's north-eastern Rwanda with his entire company. He is the product of the sacred, since his mother is called Gasani, which means "sacred" (Coupez and Kamanzi 1962: 62). In other versions, Kigwa is called Mana or Sabizeze. The name Mana evokes the holder of supernatural power, and Sabizeze, "he who prays favourable spirits". This refers to the consultation of the spirits for seeking a favourable situation (Chrétien 1999: 284). The three names attributed to him are full of meaning. The name Kigwa alludes to a wonderful adventure that comes from the supernatural, to fall from the sky and land safe and sound with all his company.

The last two refer to the consultation of the spirits, the latest one alluding to a situation provided by favourable spirits. The names of his parents are also symbolic. His father is Shyerezo, that is, "end" (Coupez and Kamanzi 1962: 62), but he is also known as Nkuba, i.e., "thunder" symbolizing a supernatural force. The name Kigwa and those of his parents therefore belong to a vocabulary associated with the sacred.

The importance of tales of the origin of Rwanda rests on the specificity of not revealing the authentic origin of the dynasty, but of providing information on the perception of the ideology of kingship (Vansina 2001). But it is Balandier's following reflection that makes it possible to better understand the importance of the myth of Kigwa in the study of sacred kingship in ancient Rwanda: "Myth goes back to the time of beginnings, origins, creations; it refers to a primordial, hidden reality; it helps to give meaning to and structure the sensitive universe. It inscribes the sacred in a supra-rational world vision" (1996: 12).

5.2. Gihanga, the Inaugurator of the Cow and the Drum

Kagame (1972) considers that the foundations of that praise are erroneous, since before Gihanga, other dynasties existed. That leads this author to assert that Gihanga was neither the inaugurator of the cow nor of the royal dignity, nor of the dynasty, but that he could be considered as the reorganizer of the dynasty. Despite this stance, he affirms, without nuance, a formula that has become famous among scholars: "that Gihanga has existed, the thing cannot be questioned" (1972: 41).

Yet, Gihanga's importance is played out in the inauguration of the cow and the drum and not in the reality of his physical existence. Gihanga is rather a hero, not that he is an authentic person, but that he inaugurated the cow and the drum. That is why we believe that praise has to be understood symbolically. It is important to scrutinize the meaning of this praise instead of categorically rejecting it.

To prove that Gihanga really existed, Kagame reveals that *ubwiru* devotes many narratives to him. Those narratives are, for our part, more interesting in a different perspective of the authentic existence of Gihanga. They are revived by ritualistic practices performed by the ritualists to honour the patriarch, such as venerated groves that kept the memory alive, especially those of Buhanga or Muganza in the present Kamonyi district where he was buried. Other memories were attached to a livestock herd, *umutwe w'inika*, whose original core was the Gihanga's herd. Those cows were entrusted to the *Heka* lineage, descendant from the official who cared for the cows of Gihanga. The leader of that lineage lived in Runda.

The most interesting case is that of the Tsobe lineage. The legend presents that lineage as a descendant of Rutsobe, son of Gihanga. A chosen member of that lineage was considered as the second person in the kingdom after the king and the queen-mother. His dynastic drum, *Rwamo*, was kept on Kinyambi hill, still in the current Kamonyi district. He was also chief of Bumbogo – current districts of Nyarugenge and Rurindo – and held the position of "Master of Ceremonies for the celebration of the Harvest Day", *Umuganura*. However, the ritual was supposed to ensure agricultural prosperity of the country. This shows how much Gihanga was associated with *ubwiru*. That is why Vansina noted:

Gihanga is above all related to *ubwiru*. The three families of *Biru*, the most important ones, are connected to him. It is he who established *Rwoga*, the first drum of Rwanda. His tomb plays a role in *Ubwiru* rites and the installation of the sacred fire of the country has been attributed to him (Vansina 1962: 46).

The establishment of the first dynastic drum, the association of his person with the three lineages of the most important ritualists, the role played by his tomb in the rites of *ubwiru* reveal the sanctity of the kingship incarnated by Gihanga. The essence of sacred kingship is expressed through *ubwiru*, because without the latter, *ingoma* in all its meaning would be deprived of its ideological foundations. Yet, since the figure of Gihanga is inseparable from *ubwiru*, we can at the same time postulate that Gihanga embodies or symbolizes sacred kingship.

Gihanga's gesture reflects the role of sacred kingship in the ideological construction of ancient Rwanda. First, Gihanga unified the territory by matrimonial alliances. Then he taught trades skills to the population. Sometime later, he adopted *ubwiru* and *Rwoga*. Finally, he founded dynasties by distributing royalty to his sons. So, he is not a king at first, since it is later that he discovered *ubwiru andingoma*, that is to say, sacred kingship and that he transmitted them to his sons who became kings. He provided royalty, for no one could be considered as a king unless he was enthroned according to the rules contained in *ubwiru* whose origin is attributed to him. Gihanga thus reflects the image of royalty and that of the sacred. In view of those considerations, the ideological role of sacred kingship could be reduced to the following points: territorial unification, creation of a material culture as a pillar of economic development, foundation and construction of kingship, dynasty and the kingdom expressed in a single term, *ingoma*.

Through this legend, we discover the ideological foundations of kingship in Rwanda, namely that kings are indebted for having founded and built the kingdom of Rwanda, but also for having initiated a material culture as a pillar of economic development. Political ideology has been implicitly expressed in the tale of Gihanga which rightly embodies sacred kingship. As for the authentic existence of Gihanga, the fact may be rather questioned, but this doubt does not diminish the sacrality of the royalty incarnated by that character. Indeed, this figure is inseparable from the intangible cultural heritage of Rwanda, because it inspired for a long-time ideological perception which are sometimes contradictory.

Concerning the tales of origin, Chrétien recalls, in an article devoted to Kigwa and Gihanga, their function: "They are social and political "charters", kinds of unwritten constitutions, founders of an order whose legitimacy is thus affirmed on the narrative model. [...] The quasi-literary formalization of this last [tale] gives it both aesthetic stability and coherence and a specific symbolic richness" (1999: 281). Regarding Rwanda, in particular, he believes that those tales carry strong representations, are witnesses of an old political culture, but that their historical perspective is not easy, given the stakes of power involved in their interpretations.

5.3 The Ritual of Enthronement

The king commits himself, through the rite of enthronement, to defending the dynastic drum *Karinga*, and if necessary, to shed his blood. That oath announced the highest responsibility of the king, knowing that *Karinga* drum symbolized as much the royalty, the dynasty as the kingdom. Through the ritual, we discover the king's responsibilities including ensuring the durability of the dynasty by lighting the fire, presiding over economic prosperity through the trades of forging and agriculture, by doing justice and waging war. Thus, we find in Gihanga's gesture and in the ritual of enthronement the functions that Westermann assigns to sacred kingship: to bring the well-being to the population through trades such as forging and agriculture, to settle disputes and wage war.

Royal rituals, however, were in competition with the force of weapons. Dynastic poetry offers illustrations on this subject. On a ritual level, it was believed that a special warrior who got voluntarily killed by the

enemy on the battlefield offered the chance of victory to the Rwandan warriors. He was then called “liberator”. One opinion at the court during the reign of Rujugira in the 18th century led to believe that that liberator was more important than all the warriors engaged on a battlefield. Another opinion emphasized the exceptional role of the combatants. There was then a debate in seven dynastic poems between the two tendencies. King Rujugira, when led to settle the dispute, he decided in favour of the fighting force (Kagame 1951, 1969).

Other kings like Ndabarasa, Rujugira’s successor, did not always obey to the ritualist’s advices. After conquering Ndorwa, in northern Rwanda, he preferred to settle there in defiance of the ritualists who advised him to join the Rwandan territory. The latter sent him the poet Musare to convince him to return to Rwanda. The poet presented the poem to the king, in which he made it clear that he was the messenger of the deceased kings who begged him to return to Rwanda. Above all, it was necessary to make the king understand that he had to think of putting his affairs in order before he died. The ritualists may have thought that a poet could tell the truth to the king without much risk, but Ndabarasa told them that the risk was rather real.

The latter had the poet arrested and held captive at his court. The king then had a poem composed that made it clear that there was nothing wrong with a king living in the conquered lands. He then instructed the prisoner poet to go and tell the story to the court ritualists living in Rwanda. Once back to Ndorwa, Musare presented him the poem in which he suggested that the king should return, since he had completed the “ploughings”, that is, he had completed the task of conquering Ndorwa (Kagame, 1951: 160-2). Ndabarasa eventually returned to Rwanda not without having challenged the ritualists.

Furthermore, the expected results of the rites were not always achieved. Several examples corroborate this case. The ritual of cattle disease “*Inzira ya Muhekenyi*” was intended to ward off any cattle disease, since at the beginning of the text it is said: “*Iyo Muhekenyi yateye mu Rwanda* (When cattle disease rages in Rwanda), and at the end of the text it is said: *Muhekenyi igacika*, (And cattle disease comes to an end)” (D’Hertefelt&Coupez 1964: 44-47). But this liturgy could not avert the rinderpest, *Muryamo*, which decimated the cattle in the ancient kingdoms of the region at the eve of 20th century.

Another case of the bankruptcy of the sacredness of power is the lack of efficiency of the “competition path”, *Inzira y’urugomo* (D’Hertefelt&Coupez1964: 214-219). The aim was to prevent succession battles to the throne. And yet, it has been established that such battles had taken place once in the two reigns (Vansina 1962). The best known is the battle of Rucunshu in 1896, which opposed the followers of Musinga, under his uncle Kabare's leadership, against those of Rutarindwa, the then legitimate king. That case, however, did not overshadow the importance of ritualists, since, after the use of force, the new king was still to be enthroned by ritualists.

5.4. The Legitimacy of King Ruganzu II Ndori

Ndori appears in historical tales as an unusual character. Thus Kagame believes that he is undoubtedly the most famous monarch of all Rwandan kings, and therefore the most popular and legendary figure:

Such a curious cavity on a rock has been printed by its club; such drawings vaguely sketched by millennial rains or by the whims of nature are represented to us as the imprint of his feet ... Numerous literary narratives dedicated to his reign give us his innumerable prodigies and his imaginary exploits (Kagame1972: 93).

It is the sanctity of royalty that is hidden behind these innumerable prodigies and imaginary exploits, and it is that character that assures his legitimacy. The materials collected by Pagès are more significant in matter of legitimizing the Ndori power (1933:271). There is, as we already know, a considerable gap between the chronology of the reigns of Rwandan kings proposed by Kagame (1959) and by Vansina (1962, 2001). The former places Ndori’s reign approximately between 1510 and 1543, that is, in the 16th century and the latter

around 1650, i.e., in the 17th century (Vansina 2001). It should be noted that Vansina has unexpectedly stated that the Nyiginya kingdom, i.e. the kingdom of Rwanda, was founded by Ruganzu Ndori. He based his opinion on a principle according to which, for a historical figure, “finding his dynastic drum heralds, in the Great Lakes region, the birth of a new kingdom” (Vansina 2001: 62), but such statement has been questioned by Newbury and Chretien in a book review (2001). The Vansina’ statement that founding a new drum means founding a new dynasty is inconsistent, given that Gihanga has found a new drum Rwoga and yet, is not considered as the founder of the Nyiginya dynasty.

5.5. King Mibambwe III Sentabyo Faces Opponents

Westermann and Balandier’s observations fit well with the above Sentabyo’s poems. Westermann believes that in ancient empires, the king was considered as God. This is what the poem “The King is God” suggests. But that king is nevertheless not totally divine, as he resembles men by the skin. Thus, he has access to a double existence taken up by Balandier. The Rwandan king was both a human person and a mystical person. The theory of the king’s two bodies (human / mystic) applies to the kings of Rwanda.

Westermann believes that in addition to the supernatural character of royalty, the king is a representative of God and as such, he executes the divine plans on earth. Thus, he occupies an intermediary position between God and men. Yet it is less the person of the king than the kingship that is sacred. In the case of Rwanda, the king definitely leaves the status of man after his enthronement, and executes those plans, suggesting that it is the kingship that is sacred.

The concept of “God” is Kagame’s translation of *Imana* from the language of Rwanda, *ikinyarwanda*. Some authors think that this translation is inappropriate because the concept of “Imana” in Kinyarwanda does not correspond to that of “God” of the Bible. Thus, D’Hertefelt and Coupez consider that this term refers rather to a powerful quality, a “dynamic principle of life and fertility” as well to a deity as to a “fertilizing fluid” (1964: 460). If we concede that Kagame’s translation is inappropriate and that we adopt an explanation that is not, of course, closer to the God of the Bible, but to a supernatural force providing beneficial effects on the whole country, we find that the explanation of *Imana*, provided by D’Hertefelt and Coupez, does not call into question the sacredness of the kingship under investigation.

6. Conclusion

As for the fact that ancient kingship was sacred, there is nothing contradictory in the literature devoted to Rwanda. The tales of origin and the royal ritual also related to Gihanga confirm that the kingship of ancient Rwanda was sacred. It is not necessary for Gihanga to have existed biologically to deserve a serious attention, since his existence in the Rwandan cultural imagination is much more important than the former one. And from that point of view, the tales of origin are important, given the strength of their representations. Moreover, the existence of those tales is well represented in Rwanda’s intangible cultural heritage, and as such, they deserve to be studied in history and in other disciplines such as political science.

Back doubted that the Rwandan kingship was sacred, since the king shared power with other people including army, land and cattle chiefs as well as with the great advisers of the court, that is, the ritualists. The king, of course, did not govern alone, but that power sharing does not contradict the sacredness of royalty. This sanctity protected the kings’ power, because their legitimacy was based on the religious quality conferred by royalty. The power of this sacrality has been such that, today, it has not completely disappeared from the popular imagination. The role of sacred kingship was decisive in the ideological foundation of power in Rwanda, but it sometimes had limitations in the functioning of that power in favour of military force, even if that force also needed the sacred realm to legitimize its achievements. In the end, sacred kingship has conferred legitimacy to the monarchy over a long period.

The sacred character of royalty is confirmed by the oral traditions found in the literature that was analysed in this article. Certainly, some other scholars have already confirmed the sacredness of the ancient Rwandan kinship, as if it were obvious. The originality of this study is to have carefully checked this statement all

the way from the research problem, the hypothesis, the theory, the material collected and presented as narratives, and finally discussed. Further research would focus on the analysis of whole royal ritual *ubwiru*.

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