

## Culture

# Jean-Claude MULLER, *Le Roi Bouc Émissaire, Pouvoir et rituel chez les Rukuba du Nigéria Central*, Québec, Serge Fleury, 1980, 494 pages

Jim Freedman



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Jean-Claude MULLER, *Le Roi Bouc Émissaire, Pouvoir et rituel chez les Rukuba du Nigéria Central*, Québec, Serge Fleury, 1980, 494 pages.

By Jim Freedman  
University of Western Ontario

The Rukuba present an anomaly to the classical African scholar. It is not a state nor is it a classical lineage society. It is a curious mixture of both. Here is a society with highly developed rituals for their chiefs, and yet only the most modest trappings of statehood. It is composed of a series of small chiefdoms, each of which chooses its own 'divine king' who are real kings in a ritual sense, and yet it appears that their most notable power is to accept the responsibility for the community's misfortunes. At the level of ideology, each of the chiefdoms could be said to be considerably centralized, and yet at the level of politics they are not. There must be a strong inclination to treat the Rukuba as an offspring of one of the more classical African political forms. Jean Claude Muller's notable accomplishment here is to resist this temptation... to recognize the insufficiency of regarding the Rukuba as representative of any other than their own prototype. He seeks a language of description that will give the Rukuba their own scholarly pedigree. He charges that the Africanists have left little room in their store-room of political forms for what appear as non-classical types. He is justifiably concerned. We find him making an appeal for the legitimacy of his people's political system among the insufficient annals of ethnological theory. It is a moving and accurate appeal.

The Rukuba may someday be to J.-C. Muller as the Dogon have been to Griaule. If I did not know him to be youthful I might picture him as a wizened adopted elder of the Rukuba tribe. The detail of his knowledge is profound and his notebooks, as I imagine them, must be voluminous. It is this immaculate detail that makes his argument and his analysis so unswervingly convincing. Let me give an example, before making more general comments, in order to give something of the concrete flavour of the book. I give a passage taken almost randomly. It comes as Muller describes the ritual procedures which transpire at the death of a chief. The ritual assistants have carried the chief in and out of the sacred hut seven times (the sacred number), and an elaborate surgical procedure begins using a ritual blade :

On lui rase la tête et on garde les cheveux qui serviront dans certains villages à orner la calebasse sacrée qui sert

en particulier dans les initiations. On lui retire la peau du front et celle du tour des lèvres, l'ongle du pouce droit et celui du gros orteil gauche, ainsi que des touffes de cheveux. On raconte qu'auparavant, mais dans un temps assez éloigné pour que personne ne se souvienne l'avoir vu, on retirait le radius et le cubitus du chef. Ces os servaient d'anse à la calebasse que l'on pouvait tenir ainsi. On dit aussi que la cervelle du chef était retirée par un trou fait au front, séchée et mise dans la bière sacrée bue par le successeur (p. 178).

This is the second of such precisely defended ethnologies from Muller. His first book, *Parenté et mariage chez les Rukuba*, published in 1976 by Mouton dealt primarily with the kinship system and elaborated particularly the unique system of secondary marriages. *Le Roi Bouc Émissaire* is his second book. There are at least two more in the works. *Du bon usage du sexe et du mariage* is one of these and a book on the ceremonies of initiation is another.

He opens the book with a discussion of the terms of political imaging and discourse. Since the issue of matrimonial ties is so important to defining villages and clans, it is not surprising that some of the more important Rukuba metaphors for political relations come from the domain of matrimony. Most important is the relationship between the dominant exogamic group and the other groups who make up a village. From within the dominant assistants. The chiefs, so goes the implication, are to the others as wife-givers are to wife-takers, as men are to women, as uncles are to nephews. He thus gives a feel for the arena of authority, of the extent to which it is part and parcel of kin tensions, and what these tensions mean.

He next deals with the issue of sorcery. It follows logically. For if the people of Rukuba politics are kin, the stuff of politics is ritual disorder, and ritual disorder comes most frequently from sorcery. The Rukuba chief is order incarnate. It is not surprising that the chief finds sorcery to be his primary nemesis. Sorcery is the principle adversary of the chief and indeed can be seen as the reason for his being. What Muller is doing by opening a book on politics with metaphors of intra-village relations and cases of sorcery is straightforward and intelligent. He is concerned with what he calls the 'idéologique' of power and not the real-politick. The purpose of his analysis is primarily to discover the logic of chiefship. It is primary because, as Muller goes on to argue, the practice of chiefship devolves from its logic.

This brings us to the primary metaphor of this 'idéologique', the scape goat or 'bouc émissaire'. It is interesting that the role of the prince in other

social contexts has inspired authors to similarly poetic turns of phrase. Luc de Heusch has given us *le roi ivre* to characterize the kings of Central African kingdoms. More recently de Heusch has written of *Les rois nés d'un cœur de vache* to characterize the Rwandan king. Frazer gave us the 'plucking of the golden bough'. Vansina, Kuper, Evans-Pritchard and many others have all looked for the key phrase to unlock the secret of African royalty. Why has Muller chosen "bouc émissaire"?

It appears that he has come across this insightful phrase from reading René Girard's *La violence et le sacré*. Girard's thesis builds on Frazer's by adding some mass psychology. For Frazer, the idea was that a society so identified with its king that when the king weakened, so did they. They avoided contamination from the king's physical weakness with the practice of regicide, by putting him to death before his natural term. This preserved the physical buoyancy of the kingdom. But for Girard, the matter is more extreme. Here the idea is that weakness does not only inhere in the king's human body, but likewise in the body social as well. Weakness, he seems to be saying, inheres in society's members, in its citizens' own weakness and propensity toward violence. It is this that the people fear... their own proclivity to rent their social home asunder, and for them the king is simply an immaculate symbol of their own fearsome tendencies. They kill him, or kill his substitute, in order to gouge out of themselves their evil inclination... in order to preserve society and themselves. To this beneficial end, the king must be a victim. He is therefore a scapegoat for their own frailties, the inevitably frailties of a body-politic built on a subversive foundation.

Muller clearly likes Girard's phrase 'bouc émissaire' partially for Girard's analysis and partially for reasons of his own. His own reason seems to be this: the phrase aptly characterizes a political rule in which the chief is at the mercy of his constituency. The king may very well be considered a protector and he may perform, as in the Rukuba case, a complex round of rituals in fulfilling this role. And yet these ritual responsibilities do little to raise the king's status above that of the populace. On the contrary, by enacting these rituals, he assumes a responsibility for everybody's good fortune and becomes the more vulnerable because of it... for he carries more responsibility and hence more blame when misfortune comes than anyone else in the village. He really does belong to the people more than the people belong to him.

It follows quite straightforwardly that the power of the Rukuba divine chief belongs more in the

domain of ideology than in the domain of economics. Being more of a figurehead than a potentate, the Rukuba authority is appreciated by his constituency more as an idea than as a brutal fact of life. This is just one of the unique facts of Rukuba life which Muller describes articulately. And then, like any other ethnologist, Muller begins to fancy the Rukuba case as exemplary of a much greater field of cases, and as having a much broader relevance. From the fact of the undeniable presence and influence of ideas about kingship, constraining the king from becoming any more than a scape-goat, we are asked to consider the proposition that all authority systems are so constrained by the ideas which surround them. Here the Rukuba and Muller's analysis begin to sound strongly Weberian:

...l'idéologie rukuba de la royauté divine, loin d'être le reflet des relations de production qui existent entre le chef, les chefs des clans et leurs administrés, *les conditions tout au contraire* (my underlining) (p. 258).

So it is that ideas prevail upon the material motivations of social interaction. This permits Muller to take on the Heusch's thesis that the extent of sacredness which surrounds an African royalty increases according to the size of the realm. Muller argues contrariwise that ideology exists independently from the material determinants of social life, and proves it (all the while disproving de Heusch) by noting that the Rukuba have an abundant ideology of authority among very small political entities. The writings of Godelier and Meillassoux come likewise under repeated criticism for their lapses in granting ideology — or *ideo-logique* — a pre-eminent explanatory status.

Once I finished this lengthy book and placed it down upon a night table with a long sigh, I realized what an immense tour de force I had encountered. The field work is meticulous, the organization of the material is inventive and the conclusions are provocative. I am certainly the wiser. I feel bathed in the aura of Fortes, Nadel, Gluckman, M.G. Smith and so on. I may not want to impose the lessons he advances so provocatively upon my own African material, but I certainly respect the basis on which he has made some important theoretical decisions of his own.