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Funerals as Feasts. Past Nubian mortuary practices in the light of the anthropology

Introduction

This article focuses on the role of cattle in funerary rituals of past and present African pastoral societies. It addresses the socio-political and cultural issues regarding animal participation at the time of a person's death. As a first step we describe the funerary practices that were performed in the first kingdom of sub-Saharan Africa, namely the kingdom of Kerma, situated in central Sudanese Nubia and dated between 2550 and 1480 BC. There, cattle played a major role in this culture, not only economically, but also ritually, as evidenced by the innumerable animal deposits (leather shrouds, horns, bucrania, whole or cut-up animals) in and around the graves. In a second step, we draw on the ethnological literature of northeast African pastoralists and on ethnographic field data in Ethiopia to highlight recent or current practices with significant similarities to those of the Kerma populations. Finally, through a comparative approach, we argue that funerals are festive ceremonies, in which the extent of animal participation in the form of sacrifices, offerings and deposits reflects the material, relational and symbolic richness of the deceased.

1. The Kerma culture

Kerma is a modern town located in the north of Sudan, approximately 20 km south of the third cataract, on the right bank of the Nile (Fig. 1). Excavations were first carried out there at the beginning of the 20th century and the remains uncovered were quickly attributed to an original culture, which was given the name of this near-



Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Kerma, the capital of the kingdom of Kush

It evolves to Kerma culture around 2550 BC, where Kerma appears to be the major site. It emerged relatively quickly as a strong political and competitive power, described from at least the second millennium BC by the ancient Egyptians as the kingdom of Kush. It was indeed advantageously located at the crossroads of the main north-south route down the Nile Valley and the east-west desert route. Its population also settled in a fertile alluvial plain, particularly favourable to an economy based on production (Honegger and Williams 2015). This commercially and ecologically strategic position undoubtedly played a role in the development of a stratified society leading up the emergence of the kingdom (Hasfsaak-Tsakos 2009). The overall chronology of the Kerma culture is today well established (Gratien 1986, 1978) and it has even become more precise in the last few years with distinct phases within each major period (Honegger 2018a; Privati 2004, 1999). Thus, the evolution of the Kerma civilisation is divided into Early Kerma (2550-2050 BCE), Middle Kerma (2050-1750 BCE) and Classic Kerma (1750-1500).

by modern town (Reisner 1923). Since 1977, excavations have been part of ongoing research programmes that have focused mainly on two areas. The Swiss archaeological mission in Sudan has thus concentrated its efforts on the ancient city, located 1.5 km from the Nile and covering more than 20 hectares, and on the vast necropolis 6 km east of the Nile, containing over 35 000 graves and extending over 70 hectares (Bonnet 2014; Honegger 2018a). These works, like that carried out in Nubia by other archaeological missions in recent years, now provide a broader and more detailed understanding of this culture, its territory economy and its socio-political organisation (Bangsgaard 2014; Emberling 2014; Emberling *et al.* 2014; Welsby 2012; Buzon and Judd 2008; Grant 2001; Gratien 1978).

Since the end of the third millennium BC, a local culture named Pre-Kerma developed in Upper Nubia and is particularly well documented in the area of Kerma (Honegger 2019).

Our interest is primarily in domestic animals, particularly cattle, as they played a significant role in the life of the kingdom's inhabitants. Animal bones and other animal remains have been found in abundance in the ancient city and in the eastern necropolis (Bonnet 2000; Chaix 1993a). Those uncovered in the city provided information regarding the economy of the capital of the kingdom, based more on domestic animals (cattle, sheep, goats) than on hunted ones. Those found in and around the graves bear witness to a rich ritual and religious life. They attest to practices linked to a strong pastoral ideology, which has also been observed in other sites of north-eastern Africa (Dubosson 2021). However, a major change in these practices occurred in Kerma towards the end of the third millennium BC, with a hitherto unseen and exceptional display of power and "wealth on legs" during funerals. We suggest here that such a shift in the population's ritual lives reflects the rise of lavish funeral feasts and that it was a critical mechanism in the emergence of social complexity in the area.

2. The role of cattle in the Kerma funerary rituals

In the first phases of the kingdom's formation (*Kerma ancien* 0 and I, cf. Honegger 2018a), there is no particular differentiation between the graves. They are generally small, mostly rectangular and with an average surface of 0.9 m². They gradually became oval and only marginally larger during the *Kerma ancien* I with an average surface of 1.2 m² (Honegger 2018b). The body is laid in a curled-up position, the head to the east and looking north. Apart from a few personal ornaments, there are few grave-goods and, on the surface, only a few pots are sometimes deposited upside down on the ground (Fig. 2). The pit is covered with a mound of earth, the latter being decorated with carefully arranged black and white stones. In this phase, livestock is discreet. The deceased is usually laid and wrapped in a shroud made of ox skins and sometimes a caprine horn is placed in the filling of the pit. Wrapping appears here as cultural and technical act, a form of containment that is used to conserve and preserve, but possibly also as a symbolic technique to protect against, control of, or gain favour with the supernatural world (Harris 2014). It is also likely that the skins were used during their owners' lifetime as mats to rest or sleep. As the horn of caprine has no alimentary value, it cannot have been a food offering for the deceased. Such a deposit refers to the symbolic value of the horn and more broadly of livestock for the Kerma population.

In the next phase of Early Kerma (*Kerma ancien* II), these ritual practices changed, apparently to reflect a stronger social stratification. Indeed, from 2300 BCE the graves expand, as indicated by their average surface of 4.2m². They become more circular and contain more objects: weapons such as bows and arrows for the men, metal objects in copper alloy or gold (mirrors, jewellery), pottery imported from Egypt, leather bags, tools and many fine wares at the top of the

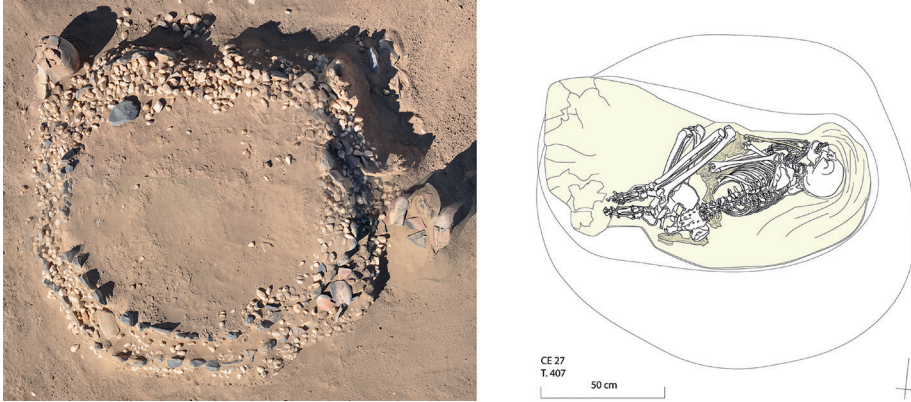


Fig. 2. During the Kerma ancien I, it is common to place pots next to tumulus and to lay the deceased on a leather skin

graves. Those with more than one individual also become more frequent. Next to the buried main person is sometimes an accompanying deceased, more rarely there are two or three of them. The animal involvement in the funeral ritual is pivotal at this period and takes on a new dimension. It is no longer confined to the pit, *de facto* invisible once the grave is closed with earth and covered with a stone mound. From this time on, it is also displayed on the surface in front of the tumulus. In many respects, the ritual use of domestic animals becomes spectacular. Whole animals are placed in the pit with the deceased, up to six or more in the most important graves. These are usually young rams and dogs, which are laid at the deceased's feet (Fig. 3). As the pit is larger, the ox skin covers the whole surface of the bottom and a second one is used to cover the deceased entirely.

On the surface, animal skulls now appear. Their number is limited and linked to the size of the grave. Only graves that are at least 3 metres wide have such a display and it generally comprises less than a dozen bucrania. The practice is thus still rare and concerns for more than half the men, but women and children also benefit sometimes too. The skulls are arranged in a crescent-shaped pattern to the south of the grave. These are bovine skulls, which are facing towards the grave where the deceased lies. In two cases, a few goat skulls were placed in front of a grave with bovine skulls.

During Phase III (2150-2050 BCE), the new ritual practices continue and even increase at the end of this period with more animal sacrifice and an ever more dramatic display of wealth. Large deposits comprising dozens of bucrania and ceramic on the surface adorn the richest graves (Fig. 4). It is suggested that at this time power tends to be concentrated in the hands of only a few individuals for whom lavish funerals are held. Indeed, although there is a decrease in the number of rich tombs compared to the previous period, there is an increase in offerings

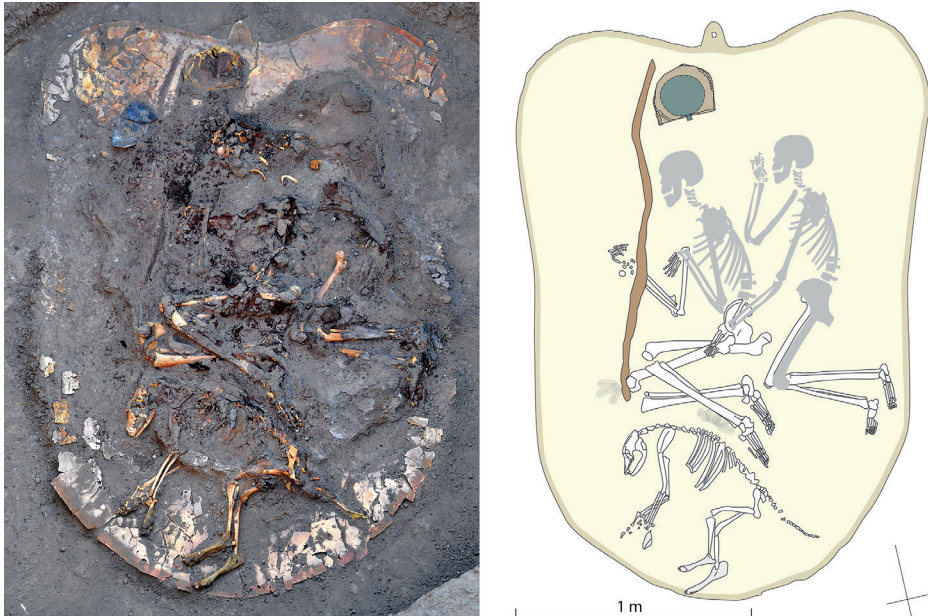


Fig. 3. Grave of an archer from Early Kerma Phase II (2300-2100 BCE), found in Sector 23 of the Kerma Eastern Cemetery. The grave contained two individuals: a young man in the central position and a woman placed by his side. A dog, a bow, an ostrich-feathers fan and a bronze mirror accompanied the young man



Fig. 4. At the end of the Early Kerma, the wealth is concentrated and exposed near only a few graves, whose bucrania deposit can reach up to 50 pieces

and other goods deposited with some of the deceased. In addition, the pottery also shows a change, with a notable loss in diversity, in favour of a repetition of certain elaborated decorations.

At the beginning of Middle Kerma, the animal deposits quickly reach impressive proportions that then remain constant during all this period and will then strongly decrease during the Classic Kerma (Fig. 5). Phase I (2050-1950) witnesses the appearance of the first royal graves, whose diameter exceed 10 meters and include over 1400 bucrania placed in front of tumulus (Honegger 2018b). In the following phases of Middle Kerma, the largest and richest graves are accompanied by hundreds of bucrania and in the some cases, this number can reach more than 5,000 (Chaix *et al.* 2012). These bucrania arranged on the surface are now the norm for horn deposits (Dubosson 2011). They are always placed along the southern edge of the tumulus so that the head of the animals faces the deceased, usually an adult male. These arrangements and their composition suggest 'symbolic herds' accompanying the deceased into the afterlife, with oxen and bulls in front, followed by cows and their calves (Chaix 1988). Such a high number of bucrania in front of the tombs poses many questions. On the one hand, the alluvial plain of Kerma does not allow such a large number of cattle to be raised (Chaix and Grant 1992). One can consider therefore that this livestock comes from various regions of the kingdom, and even beyond, as suggested by isotopic analyses (Iacumin *et al.* 2001). On the other hand, do these 'symbolic herds' come from animals sacrificed during the funeral period or are they the result of an accumulation of skulls previously set aside for the occasion? Animal sacrifices, in many cases here, mean an enormous amount of meat to be shared and consumed within a certain time period (Haaland 2012). This would show that considerable efforts are made by the relatives of the deceased to extend the family's sphere of influence by inviting and feeding as many people as possible and from as far away as they can come. The simple deposit of dedicated skulls means however that no sacrifice nor meat feasting was held at that time. The bucrania would then come from various past feasting ceremonies. They would have been kept for a time, only to be finally sent to the grave, offered as a tribute to the deceased, or thought of as a trophy (Salvatori and Usai 2019; Emberling 2014). These questions will be discussed in more detail when comparing them with ethnographic situations. In any case, it seems that the most powerful lineage of the Kerma society are in competition for the leadership and that this phenomenon is expressed by the wealth deposited in and around the graves. The wealth is evident from the combination of Egyptian imports, the accompanying dead, the number of bucrania deposited in front of the tumulus and the number of fine wares deposited next to the grave (Fig. 6). These vessels could equally well imply a mass distribution of foodstuffs and liquids, probably for on-the-spot consumption. A new rite is also performed



Fig. 5. View of the first royal tomb of Kerma at the end of its clearing (2050-2000 BCE). One can see the edge of the burial mound composed of earth and stones, the postholes of the wooden architecture inside the sepulchral pit, and the approximately 1400 cattle skulls to the south of the tomb

which will last until the Classic Kerma. It consists of depositing in the pit to the north of the deceased large cut parts of an animal (essentially sheep), prepared in a stereotyped way very similar to that done today in northern Sudan (Chaix 1993b). This practice will grow over time, with more than 70 pieces in few cases. They are deposited in the grave as meat offerings, which meant an economically important sacrifice for the donors.

In the following phases of Middle Kerma and throughout Classic Kerma, the practice of including animals in funeral rites continues. However, there is a gradual decline in bovine involvement over time, perhaps due to the reduction in herds towards the end of the second intermediate period, presumably caused by a depletion of vegetation due to more arid climatic conditions (Chaix 1998; Gratien 1978). Another explanation could be that royalty is well established and the transmission of power to the heirs is less subject to internal struggles. The competition between lineages would therefore be marked less significantly by luxurious funerals. During the Classic Kerma, the bucrania deposit is indeed reserved only for the largest tumuli, measuring from one to several tens of meters in diameter. This tendency for wealth display, which was strictly limited to the ruling elite, is also observed at Saï (Gratien 1975). Despite a lower number of bucrania during this period, usually only a few dozen, their mere presence nevertheless attests to the strong commitment attached to the practice. However, these reflections should be considered with caution. Other elements argue in favour of a reinforcement of the wealth of the rulers, especially if we consider the dimensions of the last royal tumulus of the cemetery, up to 90 metres in diameter, the presence of ruler's warrior retinue or personal bodyguards, and the number of accompanying deceased that can reach several hundred individuals (Hafsaas-Tsakos 2013; Judd and Irish 2009).

In order to better understand the meaning of animal participation in funerals, from sacrifice and consumption to deposit, we use ethnographic analogy. We present cases from the ethnological literature as well as from our field data, which provide valuable information on the socio-political aspects, as well as on the significance of animal use. Indeed, East African pastoral populations have cultural practices comparable, in some respects, to those observed in Kerma. This becomes evident when witnessing the funeral rituals, which give rise to feasts involving animal sacrifices and abundant consumption of meat and alcoholic beverages.

3. Funerary rituals in present pastoral societies

The widely held idea in literature that East African pastoralists live by, for and with livestock actually reflects the economic, cultural and social importance of domestic animals to their owners in order to give meaning to their existence. The privileged relationship that is established during their lifetime

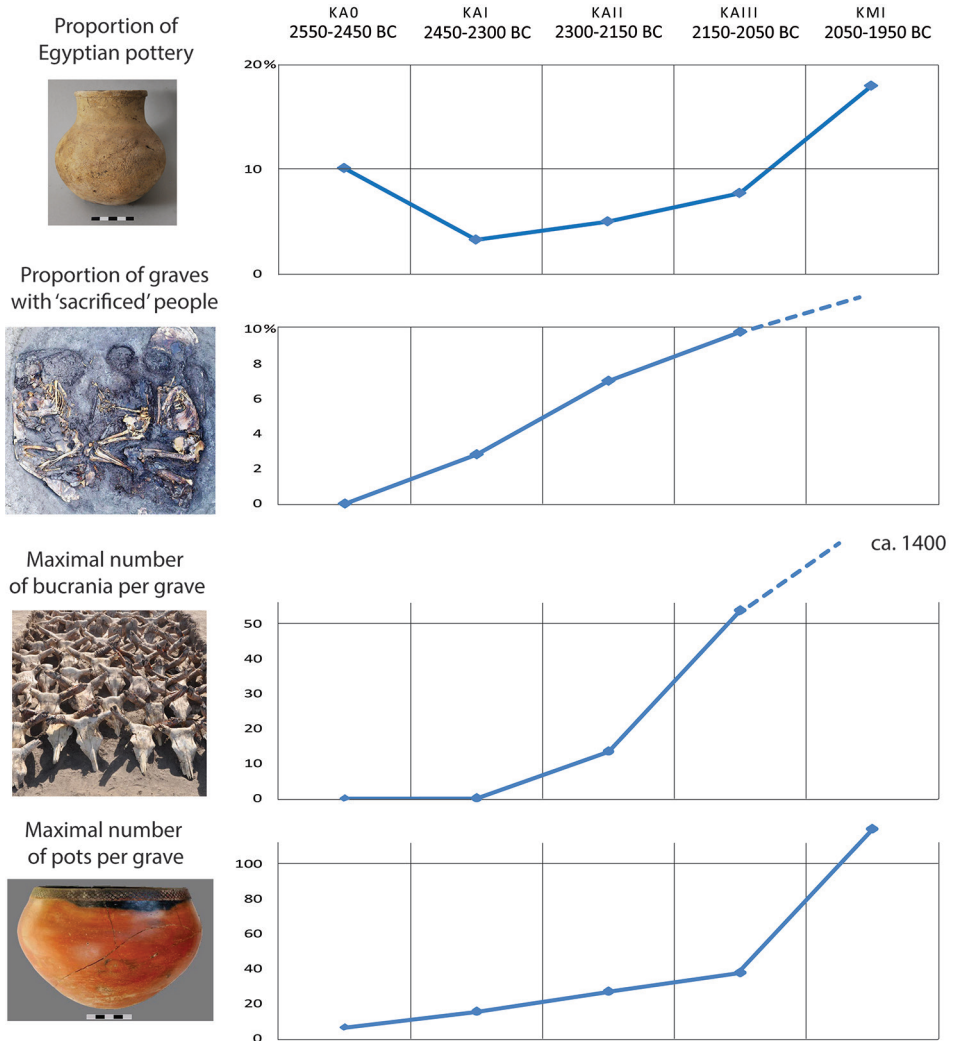


Fig. 6. Competitive lavish funerals are evidenced by the increase of deposits in and next to the grave of exotics goods, 'sacrificed people', bucrania and elaborated funerary pots. The proportions were calculated on the basis of 409 graves excavated between 2008 and 2018 (Honegger 2018b)

through the process of domestication is also expressed at the time of death. Indeed, the livestock appear as a key medium in the two transitions that help to remedy the dynamics of physical, social and spiritual ruptures generated by death and to ensure the renewal and continuity of life. First, the deceased must pass from a state of impurity or contagion to a state of ritual purity and harmony with the spiritual world. The living, through the rituals of preparation and burial of the deceased's body, ensure this transition. It is common to use animal products for washing the dead (butter, milk) or for the transport and deposit of the deceased in a pit (leather cover under the body and above). Secondly, a specific transitional process must repair the social disintegration or rupture caused by death. Through mourning rites and funerals, the survivors who were in a marginal state, which they had entered through separation rites, will be reintegrated into the community (the prohibitions on mourners are lifted) and group solidarity will thus be safeguarded. Food offerings and animal sacrifices are here important features. These two transitions are linked to each other and involve specific funerary rituals that generally serve to lead the deceased and the living towards a mutually beneficial balance (Bloch and Parry 1982; Huntington and Metcalf 1979; Thomas 1968; Van Gennep 1909). The use, function or meaning of livestock may, however, vary within these transitions. As the examples above show, the extent of animal participation is generally related to the status, identity and wealth of the deceased.

In the pastoral world, whether nomadic, semi-nomadic or principally sedentary, the funerary rituals of the younger members of the society are relatively simple, involving very little animal participation, that is, with little or no sacrifice. This phenomenon is linked to the society's low investment in such members or in those it does not consider to be fully members.

These members are incomplete socialized beings, whose death causes pain to close relatives, but whose funerals are quick and discreet. The death of adults, socially recognized and integrated into their society (initiated, married, without children but especially with), implies a greater animal participation, both at the time of separating from the corpse and at the time of the funeral.

Two examples of pastoral societies are presented below. The first concerns the Hamar, a small-scale society of southwestern Ethiopia, which has no centralized form of authority. Its socio-political organization is based on a system of age groups and collective power. The second concerns the Shilluk, a highly hierarchical society of South Sudan recognizing a single sovereign, the *reth* or king. This kingdom is here addressed in its so-called traditional, premodern or archaic form. From this organizational point of view, these examples suggest -from an evolutionary perspective to be taken with caution - possible analogies with the societies of Early Kerma on the one hand and Middle Kerma on the other.

Among the Hamar of Ethiopia, like other pastoral populations, livestock is a material wealth. Good herd management allows every Hamar man to gain economic independence, thanks to the many products and services provided by his animals. This cumulative family capital is passed on from one generation to the next. Livestock is also a relational wealth, updated through the satisfaction of animal basic needs or through rituals. All these activities contribute to good social and political relations between herders (Fig. 7). Livestock is also a symbolic wealth, especially for herders with favourite animals (Dubosson 2014). These animals contribute to prestige and identity. Herders can be given a name that refers to the coat colour of their favourite animals and they will consider such animals as guardians of their good fortune. Among the Hamar, when that good fortune is threatened and a person dies, the rituals that take place are dependent on his or her status and identity. The more important the latter, the more significant the rituals are.

Children and adolescents who have not been initiated or married are buried in a pit dug in their parents' cattle pen. A goat or a lamb is sacrificed and their personal objects (bracelets, beads, clothes, bows, weapons, livestock) are distributed to their younger brothers or sisters. A child who has not been socially recognized through the naming ritual cannot have personal possessions (necklaces, clothing) and must be buried in the pen without any animal being sacrificed. For such children, there are no visible signs in the landscape that mark the presence of the graves.



Fig. 7. Among the Hamar of Ethiopia, like other pastoral populations, cattle and goats play a fundamental role in all stages of a person's life and at death as well

The death of a married adult involves significant expenses, incurred by the family of the deceased (Fig. 8). Traditionally, the deceased is laid out for about four months in his settlement, in a hut, wrapped in a fresh cow skin. Various rituals and ceremonies characterize this period (Lydall and Strecker 1979). They include the commemoration of his actions accompanied by dances and songs, the exhibition of his wealth, the sharing of his goods among his heirs (children, parents and friends), and are marked by the sacrifice of domestic animals (goats, sheep, cattle) and the exchange of goods (animals or honey). Then, three days before the departure for his grave, a special bovine is sacrificed and its skin is used to wrap the corpse. On the morning of the third day, the funeral procession, composed of men, women and the deceased's herd, set off. Sacrifices take place on the way for those who travel and help carry the deceased, others take place at his grave. They make it possible once again to eat meat, which is rare on ordinary menus. Once the tumulus has been erected, an elongated stone is placed at the top. This stela symbolizes the deceased. Branches that represent the dead man's cattle enclosure surround it. The wealth of the deceased is symbolized by these small stones placed around the stela. Before being placed by the deceased's children, nephews and nieces, these stones are coated with butter, which is the symbol of fertility, abundance and life. They represent cattle. The deceased is charged to continue to watch over the welfare of the family herd. A man who enjoys a large herd during his lifetime can marry several women and have many descendants who, at the time of his death, come to deposit these stones. Actually, the greater a man's material and relational wealth, the greater will be the deposit of these cattle stones (Fig. 9). The presence of livestock is here symbolic. Wealth on legs is not sacrificed in large numbers for ordinary people, less than a dozen head of cattle for the funeral of the richest, a cow or a few goats for the poorest. Only an extraordinary person, namely the *bitta*, who is the ritual leader of the Hamar, has a more lavish funeral.

Upon the death of the *bitta*, a hut is built near his settlement and his body is placed on a platform. After five months, members of his clan move the corpse to a large forest, where his ancestors rest. Animals are being led to this cemetery. Members of the *bitta's* family in recognition of his achievements sacrifice them. The meat is shared and the animals' horns and skulls are placed inside the new hut that was built to accommodate him. The large skulls with mighty horns form the outer circle, then come the medium-sized skulls and finally the smaller ones on the inside circle. The *bitta* is in the middle of the bucrania circles (Jensen 1959). He is not buried in the ground like other people. His body is left in this hut, in a crouched position, and wrapped in a complete ox skin, with tail, head and hoofs (Fig. 10). Then, all the people gather in his settlement and for several days, even weeks, people celebrate and pay tribute to the deceased and his family, offering goods and new animals to be sacrificed.



Fig. 8. At funerals, livestock is put to death and the number of sacrifices among the Hamar reflects the prestige and fortune of the deceased. People who have come to mourn then consume the meat in the settlement



Fig. 9. Tumulus of Hamar elder. At its summit, a stele symbolizing the deceased is erected and surrounded by small stones representing his herd

At the beginning of the 20th century, among the Shilluk, the extent of animal sacrifices and deposits depended on the status, identity and wealth of the deceased. Thus, for common people, only a chicken, a goat and an ox are sacrificed one month after burial, but for important people such as heads of families or villages, rich livestock owners or respected elders, animal sacrifices are more lavish. Indeed, dozens of goats and cattle could be sacrificed. The horns of the animals are inserted on the grave, so that they are visible from afar to everyone. It can thus be said: this is the tomb of such and such an individual. Many people (relatives, friends, neighbours) are invited, beer is consumed and the participants, some of whom sing and dance, eat the meat of the sacrificed animals. Then people slowly leave the place and the funeral is completed (Baumann and Westermann 1962; Seligman and Seligman 1932; Westermann 1912).

The funeral of the most important figure in this society, the king (*reth*), was remarkable for the extent of animal sacrifice and deposit on the surface of the grave (Howell and Thompson 1946; Westermann 1912). In accord with Shilluk custom, the final mourning ceremonies and the burial of the late *reth's* remains took place several months or up to a year after his death. They lasted between two and four days and included dances, songs, speeches, and feasts. All the people of the country were invited to participate and to honour their deceased king. But before coming to in his village of birth or adoption, where his final burial place was located, all the country's leaders and their men had to go and collect livestock. There were no obligations to give. However, it was expected that people should contribute according to their means, and the pressure to give was greater on those living close to the village than on those living further away (Howell and Thompson 1946). In the 1940s, the Shilluk population was estimated at 110,000 (souls) for some 25,000 head of cattle (Evans-Pritchard 1948). It provided one part of the animals, and the king's family provided the other part. All the animals were gathered near the king's grave, and publicly sacrificed, speared, and consumed on the spot. Over 300 cattle were slaughtered in less than a week and the chief of the royal clan and the eldest son of the deceased king distributed the meat among those present, including hundreds of warriors belonging to different Shilluk divisions. The sharing and consumption of food were fully part of these funeral ceremonies that allowed the living to take leave from the dead. Indeed, only then could it be said that the king had disappeared. The number of animals sacrificed was said to reflect the prestige of the deceased king (Schnepel 1991). Certainly, by offering lavish hospitality, such funeral feasting served also to enhance the status of its descendants or successors. A semi-circular palisade was installed around the tomb, built like a traditional dwelling with several huts. It formed a screen against which were placed the king's spears, as well as the banners of each Shilluk division. At the top of the stakes were placed the horns and tails of the sacrificed animals (Thomp-

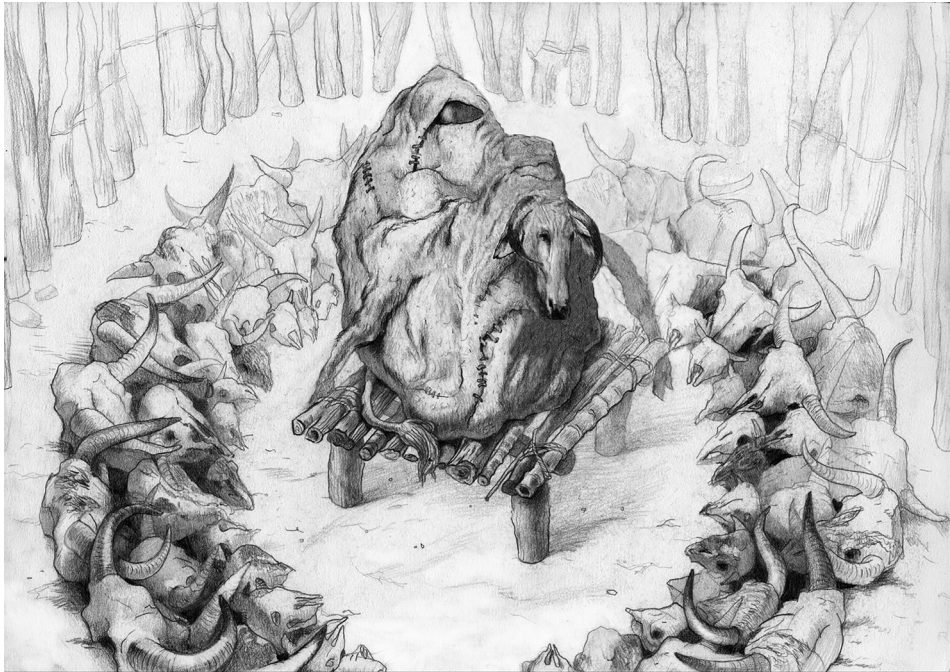


Fig. 10. Reconstitution of the burial of the Hamar ritual leader (bitta). Circles of bucrania surround the deceased who rests on a platform, wrapped in a complete ox skin

son 1948). And several horns were also placed at the entrance of one of the huts. The sacrifices marked the end of the funeral and the installation of the new king could then begin.

4. Conclusion

The evidence discussed above and a critical and well-informed comparison of ethnological and archaeological data suggest several conclusions, or at least provide valuable insight on the role of domestic animal at the time of a person's death.

Animal sacrifices and deposits of bucrania or horns appear in Africa as ancient practices carried out especially for individuals with a significant position in their society. They are generally adult men who occupy a ritual or political function, or who have acquired a certain wealth during their lifetime. That wealth can be material, relational or symbolic. One can say that funerals are generally representative of a person's identity, status and wealth, and that the feasts to which they give rise serve to create, affirm or legitimize a certain social order.

Bucrania and horns, which are non-consumable animal parts, are frequently found in cemeteries (Salvatori and Usai 2019). It is common practice to send only

the animal 'in spirit' to the deities and ancestors or to leave them only its non-consumable parts; for the rest, the animal is cooked and eaten by humans. This is in line with the cosmogony of many African pastoral societies, which indicates the sky as the residence of the divinities, ancestors or spirits. The place where the animal is laid out or its vicinity can be considered as a place of exchange between the deceased, the living, the divinities, spirits and ancestors. The living make donations to the deceased there and he offers through his relatives a part of his herd for the guests to feast in his memory. We can think here of the aggregation rites and funeral feasts whose purpose is to reconnect, among all the members of a surviving group, the chain that had been broken by the disappearance of one of its links. They make regeneration possible, through a resource conceived as the most essential to the production and reproduction of the social order, namely livestock. In fact, the laying out of the animal commemorates a sacrificial act necessary for the reintegration of the bereaved living and for the aggregation of the deceased into the world of the dead or into the community of ancestors or spirits (Thomas 1982; Van Gennep 1909).

If these bucrania and horns are placed in an open space or at the top of a structure, it may not only be to indicate that the rituals have been performed according to tradition but also to better communicate with the ancestors, spirits or deities in the sky. Indeed, any 'religious' ritual is never just 'religious' (Testart 2006). In the ritual, social strategies are also played out. If any sacrifice involves an expense, that of the animal to be killed, only a character rich enough can make this possible. But this sacrifice is not just a simple expense, donation or pious act, it is also an investment, a manifestation of power. The extent of sacrifices reflects the prestige, the economic capacity and generosity of the deceased and the host family, as well as its sociopolitical agenda. The group of surviving relatives, like the guests, offer their share of animals for sacrifice, or are 'socially instructed' to do so. These events usually take place several days, weeks or even years after the death or burial. When funerals are celebrated with pomp, they require a high accumulation of wealth (goods and prestige items, livestock, grain). They are real feasts involving the sharing and distribution of highly valued foods, such as freshly slaughtered meat and fermented beverages. The discussions during these community meals are intense, and it is common for individuals to seek to resolve old disputes, prove fidelity, establish new alliances, and ultimately obtain social, economic or political benefits (Hayden 2009; Bloch and Parry 1982; Huntington and Metcalf 1979; Poirier 1968). Such feasts fit perfectly into a political economy whose goal is to increase the number and loyalty of subjects. Actually, kingly power is not so much based on proprietary control of the subjects' existence as on the beneficial or impressing effects of royal magnificence, display and prosperity (Graeber and Sahlins 2017). Competitive feasting funerals were thus instrumental in Kerma for

the emergence of royalty, as evidenced by the climax of animal sacrifices in Middle Kerma, which marks an accumulation, a strategic redistribution and a lavish consumption of wealth. The bucrania are very certainly the obvious signs of it. However, the very large number of bucrania in front of some of the royal tombs of Kerma raises questions about their initial use and the length of time required to amass such a collection. There is no evidence, to our knowledge, that bucrania were set aside for months or years for later funeral purposes at Kerma, nor in Africa for that matter. If examples of bucrania accumulation and display exist in South East Asia, they are found in the homes of sponsors of funeral feasts, or sometimes on their outside wall, but never on the graves of the deceased (Robin 2017). We suggest therefore that the Kerma bucrania would rather result from funeral banquets held on the spot or/and in the nearby town, involving livestock brought from various parts of the kingdom or from tributary populations. If, among the Shilluk, more than 300 cows were sacrificed in a few days for the actual burial and mourning ceremonies, it is known that similar operations can be repeated at a later date. The Shilluk funeral ceremonies can extend over time. In fact, they do not end until the installation of the new king, which can take up to a year. It is therefore possible that in Kerma, the funeral rites were also spread out over time and that several banquets were held over a certain period of time, so that people from all parts of the kingdom could come to honor the deceased and fulfill their obligations. These funeral feasts would then lead to the sacrifice of several hundred of cattle, whose skulls were finally placed in front of the mound of the deceased. Such a feasting funeral would be widely used to demonstrate the success of the surviving family and kin groups, as well as to create and reinforce alliances (Hayden 2009). The extent of the sacrifices would then be commensurate with the promotion and influence a family sought among the population of the kingdom and even beyond. Such ostentatious foods, offerings and sacrifices at funerals are rarely observed outside royal cemeteries (Kerma, Sai). Indeed, the cemeteries located on the outskirts of the kingdom testify to a very modest ritual use of livestock, especially cattle (Bangsgaard 2014, Welsby 2012, Grant 2001). So far, in the Fourth Cataract region, no in-pit or above-ground bucrania deposits have been found among the hundreds of identified graves (Paner 2014; Chłodnicki 2010; Emberling and Williams 2009; Kołosowska *et al.* 2003; Budka 2007; Longa and Śliwa 2007; Näser 2007; Osypiński 2007; Sip 2007; Wolf and Nowotnick 2007).

In conclusion, we suggest that animal sacrifices and the display of skulls or horns certainly have multiple functions. They may be intended for ensuring protection against invisible powers, support of deities, spirits or ancestors, integration into the community of ancestors, social authentication, legitimization of power, actualization of alliances, redistribution of wealth, and regulation of products. In these past and present pastoral societies without writing, heaping up the sig-

nificant remains of sacrificed animals would be the simplest and most efficient way to mark one's rank and family prestige, and keep accounts of what has been given. As such, the sacrifice definitely has an ostentatious value. A burial with a lavish deposit not only honors the deceased, but also brings symbolic and relational richness to the living. Thus, cattle have long appeared to be the privileged medium for addressing celestial powers, spirits and ancestors, as well as human community. This is most probably because cattle was and still is thought in several societies as the foundation of all pastoral life and of all possibilities of (re)generation, be it power, prestige, wealth, identity, status, social or the cosmological order.

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